"Maybe now that your one tether to this old life is gone, you can move on and allow yourself to find someone. Everyone needs a family to call their own, Willow, just like every boat needs an anchor to not get swept away at sea."

Willow Graham regains her privileges as a Special Agent at the behest of Jack Crawford and her newly assigned psychiatrist, Alana Bloom. All is well and good, until the Hobbs case; the facade of composure Will has built to shield herself begins to fracture at the edges. To help her, Dr. Bloom insists on trying different things - and one of those things leaves her alone at a fancy event in a museum, where she stumbles upon a certain distinguished gentleman who insists on becoming her friend.

But it has been a long, long time since Will Graham had a true friend.

[ A female!Will, surgeon!Hannibal AU. ]
I give up. I'll post it. Here is the beast that has distracted me from Catalysis. In anticipation for Season 3... have at it!

For your reference and because we love to share, we have in our minds the beautiful Rachel McAdams as Willow Graham. I hang out at Tumblr sometimes, and I will likely talk about fic. This work owes a lot of inspiration to the only other fem!Will fic I have read, the one that gave me the idea, restlesswind's as if drowning at the heart. Deserves a mention here. Go give it a read!

Also, here are useful links:
Pinterest board | Listen on Spotify | Listen to ordered playlist on Youtube

See the end of the work for more notes.
prologue

Chapter Summary

In which Special Agent Willow Graham meets Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

s a t u r n
1. the ruling planet of Capricorn, exalted in Libra
2. possibly derived from *satu*, meaning "to sow"
3. (Roman mythology) founder of civilizations and social order; concerns a person's sense of duty, discipline, responsibility, and endurance under hardship
4. (astrology) Saturn's return to the same point in the sky it occupied at the moment of the person's birth signifies crossing over a major threshold to enter the next stage of life
5. transition; change; transformation

The Madman—that’s what Will calls him—is livid against the darkness, fingers digging deep into his own child’s spine, teeth tearing at flesh, whole limbs torn from the body, bone crunching between jaws. Eyes haggard and yet driven to complete his task—to destroy, to *devour*—driven by some invisible, intangible force. If Will had to put a name to it, she would call it—

“Will! There you are,” Alana huffs, breathing somewhat rapidly as she materialises through the fog of Will’s thoughts. Her presence is like a cool breeze whispering through the feverish humid sunset of a Louisiana summer eve. “Listen,” she says, “I’m sorry, but I have to leave.”

Cold shoots through Will’s spine— “Alana, I only came here because you asked!”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry,” she fusses, hands fluttering before they settle on Will’s arm. Her distress is genuine; it does nothing to calm Will. “But you’ll be okay—you’re already halfway through the night, just do as you’ve been doing and you’ll be fine!”

“Alana, please, I don’t even see the point of—”

“Will,” Alana’s voice is firm, stalling her before she can even think of finishing her sentence, “you *promised* me. We had a deal. I agreed to let Jack have you back as long as you followed my suggestions. Or am I going to have a talk with Jack tomorrow?”

“That’s blackmail,” Will says, faint. She *feels* faint at the thought of losing her privileges, *again*. Alana will argue that staying away from the cases is healthier for her sanity, but the guilt Will would suffer from taking the easy path—from *staying away*—would be just as detrimental, if not more.

“I am not as virtuous as I make myself appear, Willow Graham,” Alana teases with a warm echo of the friendship that could have grown between them before Jack had picked her to evaluate Will’s *mental stability*. Now the law and her license stand between them, a solid wall of resistance: no
warmth pierces through. “I just have a minor emergency at the hospital,” she explains as she pulls her coat over her shoulders. The tapered cut cinches around her slender waist in a warm, elegant hug. “One of my new patients—very delicate—she needs me there now, more than you need me here.”

“I’m shocked,” Will mocks, an attempt at lightening the leaden feeling in her stomach. “Am I more stable than your other patients, Alana? Jack would rejoice. You should tell him tomorrow.”

She laughs. “What do you think I’ve been telling him for the past month, Special Agent Graham?” Her smile softens, entreat ing. “Stay, Will. Please. Enjoy the exhibit. I want to hear what you think of the art tomorrow afternoon. You don’t have to talk to anybody if you don’t feel like it, just—it would be good for you to have something else to dwell on other than the cases. Okay?”

“Okay,” Will quietly agrees, knowing the taste of defeat all too well. Alana is as immovable as Jack when she wants to be. “Fine.”

Will escorts her to the lobby and watches as she rushes into her awaiting car, taking the keys from the valet with a quick smile. Night has fallen over Baltimore. The city comes alive with lamplight and the brisk chill of an approaching winter. The car weaves out of the driveway, taillights diminishing in the growing dark. Will feels a slow, creeping sense of abandonment as she heads back inside.

The Baltimore Museum of Art is bustling with activity tonight, people casually walking to and fro, flutes of champagne or half-empty wineglasses in hand, all of it a delicate dance of polite lies and pageantry. The opening night of a special touring exhibit from the Museo del Prado in Madrid: this is Alana’s design. Will never would have gone to such a thing. But she promised—she had a deal with Alana—so she wordlessly bleeds back into the fabric of the crowd. The strap of the chiffon monstrosity she was forced to wear itches against her left shoulder as she wanders the wide halls without a steady thought or specific direction. Before long, she finds herself standing where Alana found her earlier, in front of one of the exhibit highlights.

Looking upon the work of art, something stirs deep, deep underneath the gentle arching cage of her ribs. The pendulum doesn’t swing—she is no psychic, her gift has its limits—but somehow, Will understands. Despite her woeful lack of education in the finer points of art theory, despite her marked disinterest in the field—she can understand. The canvas blisters with the violent force of an emotion unnamed: it colors every stroke, guides the gradation of shadow and light—a force so fierce it leaves a gaping hole in its wake, in her chest, as she attempts to grasp it, as it eats through her, this dark heart of a maelstrom, the inspiration behind the madness—if Will had to put a name to it, she would call it— “Love.”

It slips from her lips, soft as a whisper. Meant for nobody’s ears, except—

“An unusual evaluation of this particular piece, I must say,” the voice comes from beside her, quiet but with an accent. Foreign—European? Almost degraded from years of speaking English. “Most would attribute darker emotions to Goya’s work.”

“Love has no colour,” Will responds, quick, quiet, without further prompting or reason. Why am I talking, she wonders. What am I doing. “And I’m unfortunately not most people.”

Will turns to see her erstwhile companion—black suit, three-piece, expensive material, oxblood shirt, glimmering cufflinks, immaculate posture, fine hands (musician? surgeon? artist?), blond and tall, red wine in hand—she moves aside, focused on removing herself from the man’s admittedly intense presence. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—monopolise the painting—sorry.”

“No, you are not,” the man softly responds, a heartbeat delayed, stalling Will’s retreat.
“Excuse me?”

“You are not most people,” the man clarifies, “for most people have neither the willingness nor the capacity to understand that what society calls madness is but a permutation, albeit intense and horrific, of love.”

Will blinks, falters in her retreat.

“One hypothesis would be that most people simply do not have the constitution for it,” the nameless man continues, seemingly unperturbed by the awkward fact that they are standing before a disturbing portrait of filicide, converse as complete strangers about—love? “But, like you have said, you are not most people—not, shall we say, a fragile little teacup.”

Will lets out a short, startled laugh. Then she catches herself. But the laughter quietly returns. The man gives her a small, almost imperceptible smile, the effect of which is charming.

Before she can catch them, the words are spilling from her tongue, and she finds herself offering, “Will Graham. Well met, Mr…?”

“Hannibal Lecter.”

Hannibal, Will thinks, the name of a conqueror, the words of an orator.

“Please,” the man demurs, charming smile softening a notch, “Hannibal is enough of a mouthful. Just Hannibal.”

Will snorts inelegantly. This man has no business being ‘just’ anything. “Well, Just Hannibal, I’m Just Will.”

Hannibal, visibly entertained, acknowledges this with a gallant nod. “It is good to meet you as well, Just Will.”

Will can feel her own soft smile stretching, lingering, almost an alien feeling as it pulls on muscles so rarely used. She watches Hannibal sip the blood-red wine.

“Are you here for Goya’s work, Will?”

Will returns her eyes to the piece before them. “I am here,” she says, “to ‘find peace and relief in the beauty of art’. It was my ps—friend’s idea” Goya’s depiction of Saturn devouring his own son hangs suspended on the white wall before them. The irony is almost too much.

“Ah,” Hannibal nods, similarly amused. “There is more than a small measure of peace to be found in death, I imagine.”

Will frowns at that. Death, from the perspective of the dead, seems… empty. “How can we experience peace if there is nothing to compare it against?” she says.

“Is life not enough of an appropriate comparison?” Hannibal counters.

Will turns back to the painting, eyes roving over the crazed light in Saturn’s eyes. “True,” she murmurs, recalling the peace in Abigail Hobbs’ eyes, so removed from Saturn’s manic frenzy, as her blood warmed Will’s hands, as the light dulled from her vision, as she sank—finally—into sweet oblivion. Freedom. “Life can be full of monsters.”

Hannibal Lecter hums beside her, gaze settling upon the Goya once again. A thought tickles Will.
“If it isn’t too forward of me,” and there it goes again, the indulgent, charming smile, “…shall I call you Dr. Hannibal Lecter, psychiatrist?”

This time, it is Hannibal who is startled into a delighted chuckle. “I’m afraid you have me, Will.”

A sigh escapes Will. She has to marvel how full of surprises this man is—but more than that, she is most surprised at herself. “I must have some form of pheromone specific to psychiatrists,” she smiles self-deprecatingly and rather lopsidedly, because her face has forgotten how. “My friend who sent me here is also a psychiatrist.” She doesn’t say Alana is her personal psychiatrist.

“Ah,” Hannibal nods, and then he leans forward into Will, making a show of it, and takes a deep inhale.

Will gapes. “Did you just—you just sniffed me.”

“Hmm, I did,” Hannibal easily responds. Playful, open. “Making certain of those fine pheromones, I hope you don’t mind.”

Disbelief keeps Will agape until the absurdity of the situation catches up with her. Then she has to laugh. Wait until I tell her, she crows to herself, Alana will love this. She’ll ask how my night was—and I’ll tell her I got sniffed. “I don’t know what to think about how inappropriately flattered I am when I should be frankly alarmed—you just sniffed me!”

Hannibal Lecter, for his part, pulls a convincing picture of a man contrite. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to alarm you, I just found you, well, scintillating.”

“So you decided to sniff me.”

“Hmm, yes.”

Will stares for a moment, smile still on her face, laughter still bubbling in her throat. What an odd man. When was the last time she had laughed like this? “You are a strange man, Dr. Lecter.”

“Why, thank you,” the man smiles, folding a hand over his heart. “And please, just Hannibal. I used to be a psychiatrist, once upon a time—now no more, if that is of any comfort to you. Now I am a surgeon.”

“Oh? What made you quit psychiatry?” Why the hell do you need to know, Willow Graham?

Hannibal sips his wine again and contemplates for a while. “The… more conventional reason is my concern for self-preservation, I suppose?”

“And psychiatry is not conducive to your self-preservation?” Will asks. Oh, if Alana were here, she would love this man. (Will feels a tiny part of herself oddly glad that she isn’t here.) “Safer to be in your own office than to work in a hospital environment, surely?”

Hannibal tips his wineglass and challenges, “On the contrary, Miss Graham, nothing is more dangerous than subjecting oneself to the designs of a foreign mind.”

“Dr. Lecter! There you are!”

A voice approaches from behind them, and in her mute shock at the aptness of Hannibal Lecter’s words, Will can only move aside. Hannibal’s acquaintances look as if they stepped out of the glossy pages of Vogue Italia, leaving Will feeling ill-fitted and uncouth. Their pleasantries are lengthy and
allow her to gently slip away, before they notice she was even there. Will feels a tad disappointed—more than a tad, if she’s being honest with herself—but Hannibal Lecter, no matter how intriguing a specimen, inhabits a whole different world from hers. Will is woefully out of her league.

She leaves the exhibit not too long afterwards and takes the hour-long drive to Wolf Trap at a sedate pace. Her feet are hurting in a way they haven’t done since university; the four-inch heels she deposited on the passenger seat the very moment she got into her car are at fault. Her toes are cold but no matter: it keeps her awake. She will not realise until the next morning that for the first time in a long time, she considered someone other than Alana—a complete stranger, at that—for something beyond friendship. What little thought lingering in her head revolves around the sad fact that Hannibal Lecter never told him what the unconventional reason for quitting psychiatry was. She had wanted to know.

And, one other thing.

The torn, bloody flesh of Goya’s art is of the same red as Abigail Hobbs’ blood on her hands. Headlights flash from the other side of the freeway — they linger even past her thoughts, even in her dreams. They make the slick shine red on her palms. She stands at a crossroads, shoulders shivering in the cold, paths forking ahead into darkness, lights speeding past her on either side, blood dripping from both her hands. Above her, the night is soft and moonless. Around her, the quiet timbre of a familiar voice—nothing is more dangerous, it croons, warm and close, so be careful, Will.

When she wakes, it is with a horrible sinking feeling, and when she looks into the bathroom mirror, it is Garrett Jacob Hobbs who stares back.

REFERENCES

(1) The painting in question is Francisco Goya’s Saturn Devouring His Son, one of the Black Paintings.
damp, rich earth

Chapter Summary

Stammets Mushrooms Case.


So easily a bullet sinks into flesh, so readily. Its velocity sends it shearing across space, rending into skin and tissue and bone. But its speed makes it an almost painless death, the sudden tearing shocking the nerves into static, into white noise. One only feels the pain of a bullet if one lives long enough to feel it. Garrett Jacob Hobbs did not live long enough.

Will likes to think that her desire to inflict pain upon another human being is because Hobbs was a hateful man, he deserved it. For the murder of seven hapless girls, who had whole lives, worlds of possibilities before them. For killing his own wife, as if she were no better than cattle for the slaughter. For eating them, feeding them to his family.

She adjusts her grip on the gun.

The one good thing Hobbs managed to do in those last moments of his miserable life was to kill his own daughter and spare the world spare her of what a shitty life it would be, living under the shadow of her father’s legacy. At first, Abigail Hobbs looks like an unfortunate case of collateral damage, but soon, they discover that she was a more-or-less willing accomplice, a bait. Recovery would have been… difficult. She might have, could have, would have grown into one of them, and Will would have to catch her and stop her and kill her too. No. Better her father take her life. Better her blood on Hobbs’ hands. Not on Will’s.

Thud. Thud.

Will likes to think. But because she does, she forgets (except in her dreams) that Abigail Hobbs’ blood is already smeared all over her hands. It’s way too late.

Thud.

It wasn’t always like this. There was a time when seeing was easier. Life has always been hard, but once upon a time, a long time ago, Will did not flinch from her sight.

She was very young then, and she had a real family to speak of. Mom: doing the dishes at home after her shift at the bar, smelling of smoke and the sharp, sweet smell of alcohol. Dad: both arms darkened with oil and grease, frame a strong silhouette against the sunset, glistening with the sweat of a tropical sun.

Little Will looks at her parents and at her early age, she does not understand all that she sees. But she feels something warm between the man and the woman and it feels right, like the warmth of her
father’s arms when she’s carried to bed to sleep.

Willow Graham was three years old then. This is her first memory.

After Hobbs, Jack makes it official. Will is being evaluated by a licensed psychiatrist, and it will happen whether she likes it or not. When asked, Jack will say that the ten bullets lodged in Hobbs’ chest cavity pushed his hand.

Jack is lying.

Jack is afraid (like Will is afraid) of what he saw lurking behind the shadow of Will’s eyes when she stood in the Hobbs house, blood-spattered and trembling in shock, gun still trained on Hobbs’ cooling corpse. Jack is afraid, because whose bright idea was it to send Will investigating alone in Minnesota that morning? So unstable, so tightly wound, like a live wire that may or may not have just avoided being tripped.

And Jack needs to know.

Will wishes, though, that Jack had picked someone else other than Alana.

“They’re not nightmares.”

“Just dreams.” Naming them nightmares imply rarity. Will has them every night.

Alana adjusts the scarf around her neck, its deep red hue calling unpleasant associations behind Will’s forts even as it flatters Alana’s blush. Not the place or time. Inappropriate.

“I could prescribe you something for sleep,” she offers. “Restoril, maybe.”

Will refuses.

“You need to sleep, Will. They won’t get any better if you deprive your brain of rest.”

She’s almost convincing Will, but Will doesn’t know how far she can trust herself on psychoactive drugs. As it is, she barely trusts herself sober. “It’s not as bad as it looks, Alana. I can handle it.”

Not convincing at all.

Lunch isn’t worth remembering, less to do with the food and more to do with the conversation. Will adores Alana, she does, but no amount of adoration will move the fact that she does not enjoy being psychoanalysed. Alana asks her (the casual approach indicating that she is in her ‘friend’ shoes) what she thought of the exhibit. Will tells her the pieces were very intriguing. (He was very intriguing, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, for the short while that they had talked, but Will still feels disinclined to share him with Alana.) Alana carefully keeps her analysis to herself because they have an agreement to reserve her analyses for their ‘sessions’. It does nothing to diminish the fact that she is still constantly analyzing every word Will speaks.
"There was this one piece that stood out," Will allows herself to say. Alana’s face lights up. "I went back to it after you left."

Immediately after letting go of them, Will regrets her words. Alana’s face reflects a small light of hope, but what she will infer from Will’s choice of a piece will extinguish that light—and Will knows it. But something clawed and dormant scratches at the back of Will’s mind - *scritch, scritch*. Each stroke of that invisible claw stokes the vindictive ache in her chest. Will *does not like to be psychoanalysed*, even if it's Alana. Especially if it's Alana. She is simultaneously the first and last person Will wants to be a witness to her--*instability*.

"Goya," Will tells her. "Goya’s *Saturn*." And then, as if dashing her hope into the ground isn't enough, "It was Hobbs in my… nightmare."

Alana is sharp and well-rounded in the arts; it doesn't take her long to make the connections. Will is pointing out how her *suggestions* won't work, roundabout but ringing true. She knows her own darkness better than Alana ever will, and that is why Will wants her to stop. Will doesn't let herself see the disappointment in Alana's eyes, but she can taste it nonetheless, potent and heavy as it sits between them.

She had agreed to tell Alana the truth. It isn't her fault if the truth doesn't agree with what Alana wants or needs to hear.

It isn’t the last time she will see Hobbs’ spectre. Will knows this much. Her imagination has had plenty of fuel since Jack Crawford took her away from her classroom. Will feels that dreadful churning in her gut and wonders if she should, as advised, take the wiser path away from the edge of the abyss. Nietzsche had a word or two to say about that.

Then again, she never did like Nietzsche. (1)

Deepening autumn blankets the woods with a hushed chill. Time feels as if it slows, the leaves swaying with a gentle cadence as they fall to the earth, laying a soft carpet underneath Will's feet. River water courses forward with a muted hum a small distance away. Will walks along, finding a path where there was none before, as if someone has left her a trail she must seek. The pull is irresistible; she walks farther than she ever has.

The woods here are taller, denser, forming a canopy overhead. Their bodies break the breeze; their shadow shuts out the stars. Sound and light both dim until she is walking within a dark cocoon, and somewhere within the shadows is a living warmth—she can hear it move, feel it breathe. It shuffles along on a parallel trail, steps heavy and muffled by the damp, rich earth, keeping pace with her. Unhurried. Its presence keeps her grounded and warm. She reaches out a hand towards it.

Will wakes up, Winston's wet nose snuffling at the back of her hand as her right hand dangles off the side of her bed. Winston looks up at her with adoring canine eyes as Will shakes the sensation of a large, warm beast breathing against her outreached palm. It was much larger than a canine. It takes another minute before she realizes her phone is ringing insistently on the bedside table.
She swipes at it, her sleeping shirt riding up her back, and mumbles, "Graham," on rote, forgetting to check the ID under the fog of her sleep.

"Will." It's Jack, of course. Who else calls her at this ungodly hour. "I need you out here. We've got something."

"Mmnh. Text me the address."

She hangs up and rolls off the bed, reaching for the curtain and jerking it aside. Sunlight streams bright and hideous into her room. She checks her phone - 10 a.m.? Already? She sits at the edge of the bed for a moment, stunned that she managed a whole night's undisturbed sleep. When was the last time she had rested so well? She feels unnerved and displaced with how good it feels to have slept enough.

Rolling her neck and shoulders as she makes way to the kitchen, Will mentally organizes herself. It won’t do to come to Jack ill-prepared; the case sounds serious, which, when concerning Jack’s cases for Will, typically heralds more fuel for her night terrors. As if her headspace needs any more.

Soon, coffee is brewing while Will attends to abbreviated morning ablutions. Shower, underwear, brush teeth, tidy hair—or as tidy as her curls will ever get. Next pair of clean jeans and a green t-shirt. Socks. Scarf. Leather jacket, the warmer and softer one. A quick glance at her phone tells her she has ten more minutes before she has to leave. Right. Glasses, car keys, wallet. Irrevocably sweetened coffee into a spill-proof cup, a slice of warm toast between her teeth. Her dogs swarm around her as she makes for the door—a chin scratch for each and she’s turning the keys in the ignition. Outside, the winter chill chases away what lingers of her dream’s warmth.

She should have had two cups of coffee. The good feeling doesn’t even last her until noon. When she gets there, the scene is already a mess of people—mongering media and hysterical parents and a plastic-wrapped army of techs dispatched to process the scene. Jack guides her to the shallow graves, all nine bodies exhumed and displayed, the thick and cloying smell of damp, rich earth assaulting her senses.

"Dr. Bloom has given you the all clear," Jack says, looking too pleased with himself. “Therapy might work on you after all.”

“Therapy is an acquired taste,” Will responds, “a taste which I have yet to acquire. But it served your purposes. I’m back in the field.”

And what a generous welcome she receives. Nine bodies all at once. IV lines to each propped arm, functional but crude: auxiliary medical knowledge. Neat, parallel graves: organized, purposeful. A purpose—this killer has one. Price says something about the bodies being very well-fertilized—what purpose does a garden serve? What purpose behind a fertile plot with nine dead bodies?

“…high nutrient compost,” Katz tells them, but Will is only half-listening at this point, “so he was very enthusiastically encouraging decomp.”

“They were buried alive with the intention of keeping them that way. Well, for a little while.” Zeller.

“Just dirt,” Price shrugs. Katz launches into an explanation about the air supply system—*methodical* is added to Will’s list of adjectives—but obviously air supply doesn’t rank as a high priority to this killer, she doesn’t need Katz to tell her that.

“He isn’t lazy,” Katz says.

Will agrees. “No, he’s not.” And it would be a *he*. The body strength required to incapacitate nine victims and construct all of this… not that Will hasn’t met her fair share of very strong and capable women, but their killer is male. Will can tell.

The agents start clearing away from the bodies. Jack turns to her before he also leaves to say, “Welcome back, Graham.”

Will looks and looks until she wonders. White noise is what becomes of the world around her as the golden pendulum swings. She sinks deep, so deep into someone else’s design—they are buried without restraints because restraining them isn’t necessary; they are alive but they are unconscious and will never be conscious again; they won’t know that they’re dying because I don’t need them to—that when the darkness rears its head, she almost passes out.

Katz and the rest of the team swarm around the one unfortunate living victim rattling feeble breaths in its shallow earthen grave. Will backs away from the moving corpse, attempting to control her breathing. She can feel her heart galloping, fleeing from the horror with staccato beats for frantic footsteps. The tree behind her is just rough enough against her hands that she manages to anchor herself before Jack approaches again.

Fuel for the terrors. There will be more of them tonight.

On the way back to Quantico, she pinches the bridge of her nose, downs some aspirin. Takes off her thick-rimmed glasses and rubs her eyes. Anything to get the lingering image of Hobbs’ death-glazed eyes staring back at her from that shallow grave.

Alana notes the urgency in her tone and agrees to meet with her the very same evening. She excuses herself from Quantico, Katz assuring her that the biopanels and tox screens will take a while—nine bodies are a lot to handle at once. Jack takes one look at her—shadows under her eyes, stiff spine, fidgety hands—and sends her on her way. “Please inform Dr. Bloom that she's welcome to come in tomorrow,” Jack says as she leaves.

Of course. Alana has to report to Jack about Will’s evals after Hobbs.

Suddenly, Will doesn’t feel as charitable about sharing her thoughts with Alana anymore. How could she, when reminded of Alana’s loyalties in such a manner? In her haste to grab on to something resembling stability, someone worthy of her trust, she had called Alana, her closest friend, her oldest friend, her only friend.

But she can’t be my friend anymore.

She had forgotten that, because Hobbs’ face sits potent and viscous in the forefront of her mindscape, like freshly extracted snake venom. She had wanted—she still wants to get rid of that fear.

Will arrives at the pub first, ordering herself a small platter of finger foods and some water. She
already knows she won’t manage sleep tonight no matter how much she drinks, so why even bother. She sits there by herself, imagination wreaking havoc to her stability as it spins around mushroom corpses and her own blood-soaked hands. She can’t meet Alana like this.

*But it’s too late to back out,* she thinks, checking her battered wristwatch, *it would be rude.*

She can’t meet Alana for the same reason she can’t leave either. Both actions will have her talking to Jack. Alana is one of the best in her field, and Will’s forts are in no state to defend against her tonight, not like this. She has to find some way towards calm before she gets here, some way to stabilize—but when was the last time she felt calm?

*In a warm, dark cocoon, with the sound and light of the world shut out by the trees.*

Oh. That dream. Where she was walking in the woods and it was dark. There was something else in the shadows. A beast, a large beast, too large to be canine—it was somewhere around her height, maybe taller. The night was cold in her dream, but the leaves beneath her feet were soft, and…and there was the smell of rich earth—*the exhumed shallow graves smelled of damp, rich earth*—over the rushing sound of a nearby river, over a sense of calm and—

*Quiet.*

Will feels it the moment her mind settles, like the moment a key fits into a lock, like the moment the wind stops blowing right before a storm. She knows this calm is temporary. That suits her just fine. All she needs to do is to present a put-together, solid front to Alana’s sharp eyes. After that—after that, she will be driving home, with plenty of privacy to dissolve into hysterics without eyes judging her and her *instability.*

The calm endures through Alana’s persistent questions about her well-being. But.

Will’s engineered pretense does nothing to ease the sharp sting of betrayal when she talks to the beautiful woman who was her only friend, and the only thoughts about her that Will can pull up are about how she will analyze and then later communicate these words to Jack, as Will’s *unofficial* official psychiatrist with a legitimate professional concern.

It feels unfair that even their friendship has to be tainted by this cursed empathy, through professional repercussions. It makes Will wonder if maybe she shouldn’t have let Alana grow too close, maybe she shouldn’t have chanced for more.

It *is* a curse, her empathy. It destroys everything it touches.

The next day, Jack doesn’t treat her any differently, so Will safely assumes that Alana didn’t see anything last night—at least nothing worth breaking their deal over. Relief is sweet as honey—*and so are the corpses.*

“Dextrose in all the catheters,” Katz announces, breezing past Will into the lab’s morbid workspace, “and he probably used dialysis or some sort of peristaltic mechanism to pump the fluids after the circulatory system shut down.”

“He was feeding them sugar water,” Will clarifies.

Understatement. Some of the corpses are barely recognizable with the degree of fungal invasion.

“Recovering alcoholics, they crave sugar too,” says Zeller. “Feed sugar to the fungi in your body, they produce alcohol. Friends helping friends.”


Katz rounds on Zeller. “Do we know that they’re all diabetics?”

Zeller shakes his head. “No, no, we don’t know that.”

“No, they’re all diabetics, they have to be; he induces a diabetic coma and he puts them in the ground. No need for restraints at that point.” They won’t know that they’re dying because I don’t need them to.

“But how does one induce a diabetic coma?” says Katz.

“Abrupt changes in diet or medications, so he’s a doctor, or a pharmacist, or someone in medical services.”

And the team spins into action as Will’s words make the details click into place. Zeller remarks, somewhat blithe, “We dug up his mushroom garden.”

Yes, we did, didn’t we. Will says what everyone is simultaneously dreading and looking forward to. “He’s going to want to make a new one.”

Jack is by far the most exultant of the developments in the case. Though to be fair, the others don’t have as much to rejoice about (apart from the breakthrough) as Jack does. For Jack, this breakthrough signifies that his decision to pull Will back into the field is a sound, profitable decision. For Jack’s case closure rates, this is the beginning of ascension. Hobbs was the first step; Stammets is the second.

As for Will—she’s just thankful that they retrieve the next victim alive. She frantically digs into the car’s trunk with her bare hands and removes the compost dirt from the woman’s face, feeling her neck, feeling her steady pulse and rhythmic breathing. Her fingers aren’t trembling as badly as they did when she held Abigail Hobbs’ neck. Abigail was already dead by the time Will got to her.

EMTs swarm around the car, and Will steps back, shaking the compost dirt from her hands and sleeves. Jack is fuming in his spot—we have the car, we have his workplace, we have his address, we have his next victim, where is he!—when Price comes to them with a pinched face.

“We just went through Stammets’ browsing history at his workstation,” Price begins.

Jack frowns. “Am I gonna wanna hear this?”

“No,” Price shrugs, “and, yes, but mostly no.”
When they get back inside the pharmacy, Will settles for definitely no. Freddie Lounds’ name is not foreign to her—the distasteful and flagrant sensationalism *grates* at best—but this is the first time Will herself has been featured on the front page.

Will wouldn’t have read it herself—that trash is not worth her time, and her headspace has enough *rage* in it from everyone else she has invited in there, she doesn’t need to add her own to the havoc. But Katz starts reading it—*the FBI isn’t just hunting psychopaths, they’re headhunting them too, offering competitive pay and benefits in the hopes of using one demented mind*—

“It’s about Will,” Katz hesitates—Will has to thank her for at least having the *decency* to hesitate, to respect that she is *still a person* despite being only valuable for her gift of perception. “She goes into a lot of detail…”

Will can imagine. Will doesn’t want to imagine. Right now, Will wants to go back home to Wolf Trap, to her dogs, have a shower, a cup of cocoa, and go to bed.

Jack doesn’t look so exultant anymore.

“I’m about to broach that ‘Takes One To Know One’ article,” Alana starts, her tone ending in an invisible question mark, a polite (meaningless) inquiry before she starts *broaching*.

Will turns her eyes away from Alana and nods. “Did Jack send you?”

“No, I sent me.”

Not as reassuring as it should be. Alana is concerned, yes, but Will can no longer tell whether it is because they are friends or because Jack.

“Yeah, well,” Will shrugs, swallows. Avoids her eyes. “Back to being Jack Crawford’s crime gimp.”

Alana crosses her legs. “Certainly creates an image.” And then, carefully, almost coyly, she adds, “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“Ah, Alana,” Will smiles grimly, “we can talk about or… ah, *not* talk about whatever you want. You’re my psychiatrist, after all, and it’s our hour.”

Alana slows her tongue, weighs her words. Approaches carefully as one might approach an agitated animal. “That tenth victim you saved—that was a success for you.”

Will remembers the woman’s too-pale face framed by dark, fertile earth. “She didn’t look like *success*.”

“Don’t feel sorry for yourself for saving a *life*, Will.”

Will sighs, a sound of full emotions caged, unindulged. “I don’t—feel *sorry* for myself, I—I feel—” how did she feel? “—*good*.”

Except when she says it, it confuses her, so it falls flat and doesn’t work.
When Will gets back home to Wolf Trap, the sky sits on the cusp of evening and night, darkening to velvet as the blush of the sun’s parting kiss left its expanse. Winter cuts at her bare cheeks when she lets the pack out to romp in the woods nearby. She stands on the porch, barefoot and in her pajamas, two fingers of cheap whiskey in hand, empty-hearted. The whiskey is enough to ward her against the bracing wind, at least for now.

Almost an hour passes before she whistles to call the dogs back. It is full dark now. The dogs are bounding, racing, pouncing shadows in the inky blackness beyond the small pool of light her house sheds. They press towards her, their fur cold to the touch, their wet noses eager. Will lets them in and scratches each one behind both ears. They nose at her hands and face in adoration, simple in their existence, their happiness.

Will closes her eyes and sleeps on the couch that night, surrounded by their furry, breathing bodies. In her dreams, the great creature, its form still unknown, walks beside her and behind her, heavy hooves making no sound as they crush the mushrooms blooming in damp, rich earth underfoot.

Will wakes up with the distinct sensation of her feet submerged in blood.

She steps into Quantico the next morning and is promptly ushered out.

“No, not here, to the hospital,” Jack barks.

“The hospital?”

“Stammets is dead,” Jack explains stiffly. “He read Lounds’ stupid article and found out where she lived. Went up to her and attempted to shoot her companion while they stood talking in her apartment parking lot. Stammets wanted to interrogate her about you.”

You is spat out with such vehemence Will winces. Somehow, of course, this is also her fault.

“Luckily for her and for you, her companion is—was—a cop,” Jack continues as the car pulls out of Quantico’s driveway. “The same cop who let himself get conned into leaking info about the investigation, practically fed Lounds what she needed for that damn article. —Oh, the fool’s alive, but he’s no cop no more. And he got himself shot in the shoulder for her too, as if losing his job wasn’t enough. On top of that, he shot Stammets in the head, of all places—now we don’t even get to question the damn psycho!”

Jack slams a hand on the steering wheel, making Will jump. Jack’s emotions always run too high, too fast, and too shallow. It practically vibrates off his skin such that it would be visible even to a blind person. Will doesn’t even need (or want) a glance.

“Let’s just be thankful there won’t be any more mushrooms,” Will mutters, and the car ride to Baltimore is deathly silent after that.
The cop who shot Stammets is not at all an idiot, only an unsuspecting mouse caught between the fickle claws of a superior predator. Freddie Lounds is small and red and defiant as a fox, even as she wipes away the blood splattered on her face. She looks a little shaken, but none too worse for the wear, all vulpine grace and venomous tongue, words made of the most rancid sort of poison even as she spoke them dripping with honey.

Will can’t blame the poor cop.

There isn’t much of a statement to take, effectively wasting both her and Jack’s time. But it’s a long drive from Quantico to Baltimore, so Jack insists on procedure anyway and starts a full interview with the two involved. He does not need Will for it; Will escapes the room.

What greets her beyond the door is the controlled chaos that can only be found in ground zeroes, massive crime scenes, and hospitals like this one. Will supposes it’s a tertiary trauma center in more than just name. She presses into the wall and inches along, eyes darting but not daring to stop a nurse or fetch a tech for directions. She just wants coffee and a snack surely there’s coffee in a hospital also she hates hospitals.

Eyes trained on objects instead of passing faces, Will walks along. No need to look too close at the painmiserygriefanger—no need to look, block it out, block it out, Will, block it out. She’s almost at the part where she can turn down the offensive colors to white noise when the (familiar) accented voice stops her in her tracks.

“Just Will.”

Will looks up, left, and there he is, the man from the museum, all sharp cheekbones and kind eyes. That’s right, his name was— “Dr. Lecter.” But isn’t he a psychiatrist? No, surgeon, surgeon. Will is confused, caught off guard.

“Well,” the doctor says, accent curling around his words, also caught surprised. “While I must admit I’m delighted to see you again, and so soon, what brings you here? Is everything alright?”

It must be default for him to ask, Will thinks. The white coat suits him. He wears it like a royal mantle.

“Just work,” Will fidgets, brushes a hand on the thighs of her worn jeans. No nice chiffon dress to hide behind this time. No costumes, just the masks. Her masks will have to suffice.

“Workplace injuries can be quite serious, Will,” and immediately Will feels guilty, but she doesn’t know why.

“No—uh—it wasn’t me.” Will stammers. How embarrassing. “My, uh, coworker.” Technically true?

“Ah. Well. That is, if you don’t mind me playing favorites, quite a relief to hear,” Dr. Lecter nods. The line of his shoulders relax a notch. Will sees those hazel eyes flick up and down, a quick assessment perhaps to verify Will’s lack of injury. “But of course,” the doctor suddenly raises an eyebrow, “if it is a confidential matter, I shall pry no further, Special Agent Just Will.”

Will starts, looks up, looks down, and then curses under her breath while flipping her badge over. She had forgotten that she had hooked it on a front pocket. Now, how to steer away from an awkward conversation…

“Excuse me, I’m sorry, Dr. Lecter,” a young nurse rushes up to them, one gloved hand clutching specimen tubes and the other hand occupied with a tagged, barcoded unit bag of vividly dark, fresh red blood. “I just needed to clarify on the patient in 31—did you want one or two units PRBCs?
Also, we’re good on consent and the coag panel just came back, everything looks normal.”

Will watches as Dr. Lecter sinks into his element once more, warmth veiled behind a curtain of professional courtesy. “Two units, please, Emily, thank you.” The doctor accepts the consent forms, carefully tilted away from Will’s eyes in respect of patient confidentiality, and tells her, “Will, I’m afraid today is quite the busy day, but I would love an opportunity to talk at length at a later time. I know it has my full title on that,” Will is handed a card, “but as I’ve told you last week, I am Just Hannibal.”

Almost—almost—Will catches herself before she laughs. She cradles the card gingerly, like a newborn chance.

“Okay,” she hears herself say, “right. I have, uh, things to do as well, but, maybe, later.”

Hannibal is insistent, perhaps sensing her hesitation. “Tomorrow, perhaps.”

Will falters— “I—I don’t know yet if I’ll be free.”

“Then give me a call, Will. I look forward to hearing for you.” Damn ex-psychiatrists knowing she would feel obliged. “Now if you’ll excuse me, it was good to see you again.”

“Yeah,” Will agrees—she agrees? “Good to see you too.”

It has been a long, long time since Will has felt good about seeing anyone.

REFERENCES

(1) “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.” – Friedrich Nietzsche. Beyond Good and Evil (1886), Aphorism 146.
The Lost Boys case, after which Will finds Dr. Lecter's card and finally remembers to call.

Of course, Will isn't free the following day. Jack seems determined to make good use of her while she still has her wits about her, while she’s still afloat and relatively sane; they haven’t even finished wrapping up the Stammets case yet and here comes another one. Will walks into the scene, takes one look at the dead family sat around their dinner table, and sinks.

She sinks into the mire of her own fertile imagination, images running rampant across her brain. Her words slip from her lips, describing a partial profile to Jack, but she barely even notices; her entire focus towards the two dead children. Their faces are wiped clean of any expression except that of mute shock, as if struck by the nature of their own death. An absurd thought. What do such innocent children know of death?

Will goes home with their wide open eyes staring at her, imploring and confused. The bullet holes in their foreheads weep fresh blood. She chases the images away with shot after shot of brandy, her dogs gathered around her in a tight circle, sensing her agitation, smelling her fear. The fire crackles in the hearth, lending her almost too much heat. She falls into a fitful sleep and forgets to call Dr. Lecter.

“You used to work for New Orleans PD, right? Great city. Must have been fun,” Beverly Katz says in a tone so perfectly casual Will envies her for it.

“Tedious,” Will mutters, “and too much testosterone.”

Beverly snorts her laughter, inelegant and unapologetic, comfortable in her skin in a way Will can never be. She pinches a long strand of hair with a pair of tweezers and places it on a slide to prepare it for tox sampling; not once does she falter in her motion. Confidence: a foreign concept.

“You know, that’s why I didn’t go through Police Academy. Figured I could eventually make detective or investigator even if I go through the Forensics route.” Her fingers move with certainty as she flows from specimen to specimen to run the entire gamut of tests Jack wants done. They must appease the requirement for hard evidence. As good as Will’s profiles are, they are often circumstantial and will not hold up in court without adequate support. “Don’t you have a forensics degree?”

“Masters, Forensic Anthropology. GWU.” That was where Will met Alana. Even having just arrived from Louisiana and a complete stranger to the FBI, Will was already considered a person of interest —there are less than a hundred recognized forensic anthropologists on the list from the American Board of Forensic Anthropology. As such, Alana had latched on to her from day one.
“Well, someone’s overqualified,” Beverly smirks, unintimidated like most people in her field would be. Will likes her all the more. “How long did you work in New Orleans before you decided on moving up?”

“There was never any question on moving up, I knew I would in time.” Will’s voice is flat and unassuming, because she isn’t bragging; it’s a statement of fact. “My... skillset is too specialized for me to stay there for too long. That’s what my old boss said when he promoted me to detective after barely a year in the force.”

Beverly laughs again, low and conspiratorial. “That went well with your colleagues, I’m sure.”

“Oh, just wonderful.” Will still remembers the three years she spent as Detective Graham, with the acid glares, the sidelong remarks, ‘whore’ and ‘cunt’ and ‘must have fucked her way up’ —none of them were imaginative enough to go beyond the usual—but they still made her life more difficult than it had to be. She would have found allies in the few female colleagues she had, except her awkward nature and her keen eye for the grisliest homicide cases kept everyone at arm’s length or further. Usually further.

Moving away from New Orleans was not at all difficult to do after her father passed away, quietly and in his sleep, hepatic encephalopathy, alone in the small seaside house she bought for him on the outskirts of Biloxi. She sold her father’s house, packed up her life, and drove two days to Virginia, using her savings to tide her through the two years it took to finish her graduate degree. The FBI had a job for her on the very same day she finished.

“Why anthropology?” Beverly takes off her goggles and rolls her shoulders, working out knots in her neck as she leans against the edge of a desk. Behind her, a centrifuge whirs, droning loud in Will’s ears. Will sips her coffee, gives a small smile.

“Because it begins and ends with humans,” Will tells her, “it always does.”

When Will thinks of family, she sees the detritus of her own.

Will sees a memory of her mother: tired, broken, unsatisfied.
Will sees a memory of her father: desperate, afraid, powerless.
Will sees her mother walk away and knows it is to chase a better life with a better man.
Will sees her father sink, like a boat with a hole in its hull, in the vast ocean, alone, ruined.
Will sees in both of them the full spectrum of human emotion: grief, anger, greed, shame, the brief shine of happiness, love.

Her mother had disappeared from their life. Her father started to drink.

This was when she began to understand that she sees beyond what others see. Will was six years old. She began to see the truth of the world. Seeing has been a difficult thing to do since then. She has had to watch her family fall slowly into pieces before her and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“Even if we find these lost boys,” she tells Beverly, quietly as the organized swarm of technicians process the third dead family, “we can’t give them back what they already walked away from.”

Beverly rises from her crouch beside a mother’s cold corpse. “I don’t know that they even
understand what it is that they walked away from, how much family is worth.”

Jack comes in, eyes shining with a righteous light. “Will. What do you see?”

Will looks back at the burnt corpse of a child in the hearth. “Family values, Jack. Under layers and layers of lies.”

Somehow it happens that Beverly manages to get Will with her in a bar.

“Just drinks!” Beverly tells her, “because Jack is about to drive me batshit, I mean, seriously.”

Will can’t argue with that, so she comes, somewhat perplexed and delighted at the sudden chance for company. Beverly’s presence soothes the sting of her tainted friendship with Alana.

“Knew you were the hard liquor type of girl,” Beverly remarks as Will orders herself gin. Beverly opts for a very feminine-looking martini. “You didn’t strike me as the beer type.”

Alana likes beer, Will almost says, except she catches herself and fills her mouth with the sharp tang of alcohol instead. The smell brings bittersweet memories of her father, on his boat on the water, drinking under the setting sun. She used to sit at her father’s feet when she was little, leaning her head against his leg as he sat there drinking, sometimes pressing her face into his thigh and falling asleep with his hand on her hair. He was a drunkard but he loved his daughter. Will could see.

“You have the ‘I’m thinking about murderers and dead people’ look on your face; it looks constipated, so just spit it out.”

Will coughs, catching her laughter on her drink.

“What? It’s going to be all shop talk anyway, I’m just opening the floor,” Beverly gives her a flat, unimpressed face, already flagging for a second drink as she finishes her first one. This time she orders a margarita, flipping through the menu with every seeming intention of trying out all the options. “Workaholic. Seriously, you obsess too much. I’m starting to see why Jack hired you on the team.”

“Because I obsess too much?”. “True story,” Beverly nods, tipping her glass to Will. “Jack has a type. There was this chick before you, Miriam, she was obsessive too. Bit uppity, though. Didn’t like her very much. Hard to talk to. It felt like everything I said to her would go back to Jack.”

Will is once again sharply reminded of Alana. She sips at her gin. “What happened to her?”

Beverly’s face falls into a look of grim contemplation. “She was just a trainee, but Jack’s pet favourite, so he put her on his pet case—you know, the Chesapeake Ripper. Jack sent her to find leads and she disappeared, presumed dead. He’s convinced she stumbled on the Ripper himself, but we don’t really have any proof. She’s the black mark on Jack’s record.” Then, suddenly, Beverly grins at Will. “She was overqualified too, just like you—fellowship in forensics, six years in law enforcement, doctorate in psychology… you see where I’m going?”

Will frowns. “I only have five years in law enforcement and I don’t have a doctorate.”
“Yeah, but you have a certification in forensic anthropology—do you know how rare you are? Add to that your track record; I’ve looked you up, Willow Graham, you can’t hide from me anymore. Miriam was smart, but she was just a trainee, and she doesn’t have anything on your track record as a profiler for the FBI. What you have goes beyond smart,” Beverly firmly declares. “What you have is a knack for these monsters.”

Will blinks, absorbing Beverly’s words. Miriam may be why Jack feels so strongly about keeping Will stable, keeping her afloat. There is only so much guilt a man can handle.

“And, you know,” Beverly adds, sliding another drink towards Will with a wink, “the bureau will help pay for a doctorate.”

Will snorts into her drink again and lets herself laugh the tension away.

The river is quiet this time of the year, frost beginning to limn its edges when Will visits early in the morning. Cold sunlight filters through the foliage and feels good on her skin. The wind is cold but she pays it no mind. Her dogs nose about in the underbrush, their soft rustling over the babbling stream calming her wayward thoughts. Having the water nearby settles her, reminds her of simpler times, reminds her of her father’s rickety boats, the murmuring lullaby of the shore against the quay.

They didn’t have much back then, but she was content. Never, as a child, did she ever want for a different family; she may have longed for different circumstances, but she loved her father, flaws and all. Even now, she can still recall how warm his rough hands felt encircling around her tiny ones when she sat in his lap as a little girl, learning how to tie a knot, how to fish, how to make her own lures.

“You have to tempt the fish,” her father taught her, “if you want ‘em to come to you.”

When Will thinks of family, she sees the detritus of her own, and regrets. At the crime scenes, in the empty houses, looking upon the cold corpses on the floor, she knows that they won’t be able to do much for these lost boys, now murderers. So she sits on a boulder by the water, closes her eyes, and turns her face up to the sun. She has to, or else the dark flood of anger welling from deep within her will consume her entirely. Surrendering herself to the sunlight, Will pretends she can hear heavy hooves and the warm breathing of a large beast right beside her ear.

“Tell me about your mother.”

Will smiles. “Some lazy psychiatry, Dr. Bloom. Low hanging fruit.”

Across from her, on a comfortable armchair, Alana crosses her legs and leans forward with a coy smile. “Actually, I suspect that fruit is on a high branch. Very difficult to reach.”

Will shrugs. “So is my mother. Never knew her.” And then, because these sessions make her distinctly uncomfortable and she becomes uncharitable when uncomfortable, Will asks, “Tell me about your mother, let’s start there.”
Alana, unfazed, taps her lip with the tip of her pen and sighs. “Well, let’s see. Mom is and has always been a housewife dedicated to raising the three of us while Dad worked.”

“Very traditional,” Will says, and wonders if she knows her own fortune.

“With childrearing, traditional often produces good results,” Alana would know; she’s licensed in child psychology and family practice. “Instability does not fare well with a child’s psychological growth and development. Makes it very difficult to establish and maintain connections.”

“And yet my boys are running away from their families and then returning only to kill them, saving the mother for last.” They were, on the surface, very traditional families. What layers and layers of lies.

“Your boys,” Alana repeats, softly and almost to herself. “Do you identify with them, Will? Do you feel abandoned, orphaned, by your mother?”

Will’s lip curls. “Abandonment requires expectations, Alana, and one cannot form expectations of a mere shadow of a memory.”

“You look like shit,” Beverly greets her the next morning before handing her a cup of coffee. Will grunts. “Good morning to you too, sunshine.”

Will imagines she must look like roadkill, with her disheveled clothes and flyaway hair, her puffy cheeks and chapped lips and bloodshot eyes. She had stayed over after her last lecture and failed to notice how late it was until security knocked on her lecture hall while on their midnight rounds. Driving home to Wolf Trap only to return at eight would have been a waste of time better spent perusing the case files spread over her desk. She slept maybe three hours curled up in her chair and woke up with the imprint of her watch strap on her cheek, a crick in her neck, and an idea.

“Captor bonding,” she says to the team, still somewhat blank-eyed but brain already spinning.

“What?” Jack, like the rest of them, is still waking up, but does tend to listen to whatever Will has to say.

“Captor bonding,” she repeats, “or Stockholm Syndrome, whichever you prefer - look,” Will spreads pictures of their missing boys on the table. “all of them are underweight and small for their age, but come from upper-middle class, moderately affluent families—affluent enough that they won’t starve, so that doesn’t explain their stature. I’m thinking possible ADHD diagnosis for the boys.”

Price blinks in surprise, Beverly in confusion. Zeller snorts. “Since when were you an MD?”

Will ignores him. “Ritalin, Focalin, any medication containing methylphenidate affects appetite and can slow long-term growth in kids.”

“Right, but ADHD doesn’t mean psycho enough to shoot your own parent in the head,” Beverly follows, crossing her arms. “No shoplifting, no destruction of property, no assault, no battery, no delinquency—they may be ADHD but they were kind to animals, Will.”

“Humans aren’t as cute as animals even on the best days, okay,” Will says, which earns a chuckle from Price. “I’d say humans are easier to kill. Especially for an angry kid who doesn’t understand
what it means when they pull that trigger.”

“What kind of kid does that?” Beverly sighs, shaking her head.

“More importantly, what kind of kid follows the kind of kid that does that?” Zeller quips.

“No indication that these kids came from abusive families—

“No, no, no no no,” Will waves her arm, nearly knocking her coffee from the table but catching it just in time. Beverly starts mopping the small spill with a paper towel. She mumbles an apology to Beverly before hugging her coffee with both of her cold hands. The very thought chills her bones—a perversion of motherhood, lies exchanged for lies, promises of protection and happiness returned with blood and betrayal.

“There’s an adult captor, Jack, with strong persuasive sway. A mother figure—and she’s making herself a new family. She may have lost her family—or she may be unable to create one—a charismatic psychopath placing a gun in the hands of these children and forcing them to destroy their own; an initiation, a coming-of-age. And these children, they’re small and weak, their unmedicated condition may be making it hard for them to cope, what other choice do they have? Captor bonding, Jack. Passive psychological response to a new master - essential survival skill for millions of years.” Will looks at them with red, limpid eyes, breathes out a shuddering exhale. “Bond with your captor, you survive. Don’t, and you’re breakfast.”

Will doesn’t even remember when she last worked with a solid team, but it is a far improvement from the day she walked alone into the Hobbs house. She allows the armed squad to swarm ahead of her and neutralize the situation, her hand gripping her gun firmly at her side and pointed down. Jack follows behind her with Beverly in tow, both of them bearing weapons. Unusual detraction from procedure, considering Beverly is only CSI and not a full agent, but Jack has never been orthodox.

The house inside is empty but the children with the hostaged family are standing outside, where they can take a clean shot of the eldest boy with the gun. Someone does. Gunshot shatters the standstill, and Will watches in horror as a younger kid darts for the dropped gun to sprint away towards the pool—she’s moving before she knows it, running after the child, willing the situation to turn around, because there is no need for the boy’s hands to be stained, and maybe, maybe, she can offer the boy a second chance-

“Christopher,” Will says, remembering the boy’s name in a flash of light, “Christopher, put the gun down.”

A woman - the surrogate mother, the true perpetrator - emerges from behind the boy, putting hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Shoot her,” she says. Christopher’s little hands tighten around the gun.

“Chris, don’t shoot. It’s ok. You’re home now,” Will tells him, “put the gun down, Christopher.” Please, please, put it down, don’t do any more damage, keep your home while you still have one--

“Shoot her!”

“Christopher, please.”

Another sharp crack of a gun—the woman crumples to the floor—the gun jerks in Christopher’s
hand—Will jolts in surprise. After a moment of white noise, she holsters her own gun, takes a step towards the stunned boy, and gently removes the weapon from those small, trembling hands. She hands the gun to Jack and gathers the boy against her side, hand carding through the boy’s dark hair as she feels his little shoulders tremble under her touch.

“I’m sorry,” Christopher says, and Will tells him, “It’s alright. It will be alright.”

She adds one more to the layers and layers of lies—because she wants him to stay a child while he can still be a child. He has only a few moments left. The truth of the world is already imposing itself upon him, and when the last of the gentle illusions die, that is when one knows childhood has gone.

“Hey,” Beverly catches her as she’s crossing the parking garage to her car. “You okay?”

People always ask her that. Will always answers the same. “Fine, thanks.”

“Right,” she says, “cool.” But she keeps pace with Will, hands fumbling for her keys in her satchel, jacket fluttering in her haste. “Late notice, I know, but up for a drink or two? I feel like one.”

Will snorts. “At this rate, you’re gonna make me into an alcoholic.”

“Girl, don’t even try to pretend you’re not already on your way there,” Beverly sharply laughs. “Though, you know, if you need a night alone to decompress, all you need to do is say so, I get it.” She holds her hands up, a gesture of goodwill, a promise not to poke. That’s more reassurance than she’s had from Alana. For that, Will offers her a smile.

“Don’t you need to… decompress?” and Will adds, after a small pause, “Great shot, by the way.” Their female perpetrator had died of a single shot to the chest.

Beverly shrugs, shoving her hands back into her jacket pockets. “Thanks, and yes, that’s why I’m going out for a drink. Classic extrovert—I unwind and recharge in the middle of a loud, rowdy party. But I think you’re the opposite.”

“Quite.” Nothing can get Will’s palms in cold sweat faster than the thought of a loud, rowdy party.

“Alright then,” Beverly brightly bids, veering away from her to the other side of the garage. “Have a warm, cozy night brooding, Agent Graham. Try not to overdo it.”

“Try is the operative word.”

Beverly disappears with a laugh, sending Will home warm with its echoes. Beverly is not yet her friend, but Will has a feeling that they will get there, and maybe one day, maybe, she’ll be able to tell Beverly everything she’s kept pent up. It would help, exhaling the smoke she’s inhaled from the savage fires that have razed her life to the ground over and over again.

Maybe, one day.

But not quite yet.
Will makes dinner when she gets home—a true dinner instead of shoving something into the microwave. She bought chicken tenderloins from the market on the way, some bell peppers too and ripe tomatoes and cannelloni. The chicken is seasoned in crushed peppers and garlic, the bell peppers seared on the pan, the pasta set to boil in salted water, the tomatoes diced and set aside.

Putting it together is simple, the odd culinary lesson from sweet old Mrs. Bradley who lived on Lake Pontchartrain. That was the longest period of time they had stayed put in one place, living in a rickety old boat on the lake. For once, her father had regular work at a boatyard nearby. Everyday Will would have the school bus drop her closer to Mrs. Bradley’s house, Mrs. Bradley who always had tea and biscuits and a piano lesson for Will. Often she would have Will stay for dinner too, knowing that her father wouldn’t be home until late, knowing that there wouldn’t be enough food—if at all any—waiting for her at home. Sometimes she would let Will work on her lawn and garden, give Will a handful of dollars for her time. Pat her cheek, thank her for her hard work, and ask her for a smile.

“Such a pretty girl you are,” Mrs. Bradley would tell her, “such fair skin and dark eyes. Oh, those eyes o’ yours, my dear girl, they bring trouble when you grow up. You done become a fine young lady one day, Willow - you smart and you beautiful. Work hard and you be the blossoming rose on barren earth. Overcome the circumstances of your birth.”

Her eyes did bring her trouble. Oftentimes she saw too much. But Will still thought of Mrs. Bradley with much fondness, visited her often when she was in college and bid her farewell when she moved upstate. Mrs. Bradley gave her a handwritten, well-weathered recipe book on the day she left.

“Who knows when it come in handy? Men do love a woman who can cook. Ain't to be disrespectful when I say this, child, may the heavens rest your father’s soul,” she had said, “but maybe now that your one tether to this old life is gone, you can move on and allow yourself to find someone. Everyone needs a family to call their own, Willow, just like every boat needs an anchor to not get swept away at sea.”

Will thinks of her when she sits to eat, the little dining table set for only one. Still eating alone, Mrs. Bradley, she ruefully smiles to herself, but I’m making use of your recipes. Who knows when the practice may come in handy? She thinks of that airy, quiet house overlooking the lake, remembers the warmth of the old woman’s hand on her cheek. Sweet lilting melodies in the air, Mrs. Bradley’s wrinkled and sunspotted hands on the piano, her own fingers small and ungainly beside her nimble ones. Red-orange sunsets setting fire to the water, rustling leaves, the lake lapping gently against the shore.

One day, when she has someone—if she finds someone—she’ll bring them to meet Mrs. Bradley. Will has received too much kindness from her not to do so. She knows it would bring the old woman much joy to see that odd little Willow (bright Willow, beautiful little Willow) has finally found herself a family.

Will washes the dishes with an aftertaste of nostalgia heavy on her tongue. Mrs. Bradley liked to do dishes by hand, never did trust the dishwasher with the harder stains. Her dogs swarm around her legs as if they understand, following her upstairs to the bedroom. She strips and showers and slips into boyshorts and an old shirt. Winston hops up on her bed, settles at the foot of it, as Will sorts her dirty laundry from her clean clothes, hangs up her jackets and dusts off her coats. A card falls out of her leather jacket when she turns it over; she picks it up.
Will has to laugh. Why in the world would anyone want so many letters after their name? *Just* Hannibal is apparently a doctor *three times* over, with two fellowships in two different continents and a certification in the management of medical response in the event of any miniature apocalypse. Will laughs again.

She flips the card over and over, backing up until her legs hit the edge of her bed and she falls into it, upsetting Winston’s comfortable repose. The dog snuffles displeasure before putting his head on her thigh. Will holds the card above her head, peering at it, turning it over, until finally she grabs her phone.

Will never did call him back, even though she said she would. He could be expecting. It would be rude not to follow through. Just to apologize, and, maybe, check. Probably busy but—just five minutes. Five minutes.

“Five minutes,” Will mutters under her breath, “just five minutes…” she dials the mobile number.

It rings twice.

“Dr. Lecter speaking.”

Will opens her mouth, closes her mouth. What is she doing!

“Hello?”

“—u-uhm, hi, hello, I’m sorry, is this…” Will flips card in her hand and doesn’t know why she says it but, “...is this Hannibal Lecter MD PsyD PhD FAAEM FE—” she cuts herself off with a snicker, “—I’m sorry, it’s just—”

“...is this Will? Miss Will Graham?”

“—er, yes, yeah, uhm. That’s me.” She clears her throat, suddenly feeling parched. Winston’s leg feels too warm on her thigh. “Sorry to call so late, I—I didn’t mean to disturb…”

“Not at all, please, there is no need for an apology,” he says, voice now warm and welcoming where
it was firm and professional before. “This is a delightful surprise. I must admit I was beginning to think you would never call. I’m glad you found my card.”

“Of course not, I was totally planning to call,” Will quickly amends—and then hits herself on the forehead for her lack of a filter. “I mean—I just—work was sort of…”

Dr. Lecter chuckles. “There is no need for lies here, Miss Graham. The truth will suffice. I will understand.”

His words resonate unbidden in Will’s mind. Will it really suffice for you, Dr. Lecter? Can you handle the truth? But all she says is, “Well, uhm, okay. I just. I lost your number and I just found it again today, in my jacket? I really did intend to call. But you know how it gets, I was called in the next day, and one thing led to another, and… well, I forgot.”

“And that is entirely understandable,” he says. “Thank you for telling me the truth.”

Will shifts, turning on her side and pulling a pillow under her head. She pulls Winston into her body and curls around him, petting his fur with one hand and holding her phone with the other. “You know, most people would prefer lies.” She thinks of the dead families, the small cold bodies of children, the anguish and denial in the eyes of their female perpetrator.

Dr. Lecter makes a small noise, contemplative. “Most people have a need for illusion. Some a desperate need.”

“And you don’t, Dr. Lecter?”

“I certainly harbor no illusions about myself or the world I inhabit,” he answers, prompt, with certainty that is almost arrogance, but not quite. Will smiles—it is the truth. “What about you, Will? What are your illusions?”

Will’s eyes have been fixed at her wall for some time now, unseeing, unfocused. She observes her bare existence, her plain clothes and old bed and her collection of dogs.

“It seems reality is my illusion.” And then, because it hits her all of a sudden, she laughs, “I don’t recall paying you for a session, doctor.”

“Likewise,” he parries, “I don’t remember ever having a patient so engaging.”

Will snorts at the blatant flattery. “Are you saying your patients are boring, Dr. Lecter? And behind their backs. How rude.”

He laughs at that, startled but delighted laughter, which has warmth blooming deep under the arching cages of her ribs. It spreads up under her throat and down to her belly, fixing a smile on her face that is so alien and so wide it makes her cheeks hurt.

Just when his laughter ceases to quiet chuckles, Will hears what sounds like an overhead page go off in the background—“*Trauma Level 1 to ER, Trauma Level 1 to ER*”—she frowns. “Oh, are you at work? I’m sorry, I can call back and—”

“No, Will, it’s alright. Truly. That page was not for me. I would otherwise be reading some very dry publications if it weren’t for you. You are not disturbing anything.”

He sounds convincing enough that Will’s protests are quelled. “If you say so.”

“I say so,” and his word is obviously quite final on the matter. “One of the many benefits of being a
tenured physician in a university hospital is having a number of highly capable—and by that I mean proudly capable—residents to stand for me at the front lines. They will exhaust themselves to try to prove their independence, but they have also been humbled enough by experience to know when to call me.”

Will snorts. “You have minions.”

“Well, they are slightly more capable than that…”

“Trained, expert minions,” Will insists, grinning. “Can’t you go home, though, and just be called if you’re needed?”

“Not as such. This institution prides itself in its shining certifications in trauma medicine, the maintenance of which requires a trauma surgeon present at all times for any emergency. While residents would usually be quite enough for other institutions to tide overnight, Johns Hopkins likes to keep its patient outcomes as close to full recovery as possible—”

“—which is just a fancy way of saying your bosses don’t trust the baby duckling minion doctors yet —”

“—and so I stay to oversee,” Dr. Lecter finishes with a chuckle.

“Until when are you on the clock?” Will asks for no particular reason at all.

“Well, let us see now,” some shifting sounds, a sigh, “seven AM will make 18 hours.”

“Ouch.”

“Quite,” he agrees, “though I’m sure your work demands the same, if not worse.”

“True. Still ouch.” Will thinks of New Orleans and of her early days at the FBI, how days would blur into nights, on and on until the case resolved or the trail ran dry. She hates it when the trail runs dry. It drags on and on, endless, until she all but drowns in the effort.

“May I ask after your day?” his voice turns gentle, coaxing, the same tone Will would use if she were trying to earn the favor of a wounded dog. Is she wounded? Is that how she comes across? “Perhaps it was a good day? That you have time to talk tells me that your case, whatever it is, should be concluded.”

“It was,” Will sighs. “Concluded, I mean. And yes, I suppose, it was a good day… all things considered.” And then, after a heartbeat, “No more children have to die.”

Silence.

“Then it was a good day, Will.”

There is a note of something old and lonely underneath the warm timbre of his voice, something that stirs an image of her family in her mind. Back when there were three of them, her and her mother and her father, together, whole. The full spectrum of human emotion. She closes her eyes and lets it vibrate across her chest, like plucked strings on a violin.

“Yes,” she smiles, eyes closed, “I suppose it was.”
the sleep of reason

Chapter Summary

In which Hannibal begins to woo Will, Will really does need that therapy, and the Angelmaker Case overshadows everything.

Cold.

Will feels cold before she feels anything else, before the sinking sensation of dread in her gut, before the grip of anxiety around her throat. She inhales, wraps her arms around herself, and looks up. *Doubt,* she reads on his face, *apprehension, condescension, humor.* They can smell crazy on her, they look at her with derision – why is it so cold?

Something wet touches her knee – she looks down at Winston butting his muzzle at her leg, nosing at her as if to nudge her awake. She is sitting in a police car – the back of it, where the suspect usually sits – in her underwear and a thin old shirt. The door is open and she’s facing out, her feet dangling on the side, blackened with dirt, calluses torn, blood on the edges where she can see. The faint yellow glow from the sodium light overhead does very little for her vision.

“Ma’am,” the cop is saying, “ma’am, can you tell me your name?” Behind him, his partner is speaking into a radio, something unintelligible from this distance, a quiet susurrus under the white noise.

“Will Graham. My n-name is Will Graham.” She’s shivering; her teeth are chattering.

“Good,” the cop nods, writing it down. Of course; she has nothing on her but her clothes, no ID. “Do you know where you are right now, ma’am?”

“N-not at home.”

“No, ma’am, you’re not,” he confirms, taking a shock blanket from his partner and draping it around Will’s shoulders. She tugs it around under her neck. “What month of the year is it right now, Ms. Graham?”

“October.”

“Do you know what’s happening right now?”

“I j-just woke up,” Will stutters, pulling her legs into the car to huddle under the blanket. Goosebumps are breaking out under her skin. “I’m in a police car. I assume you found me…”

“You were walking down the street in your sleep clothes with your dog following you,” cop tells her. “He wouldn’t let us get close at first. Where do you live, Ms. Graham?”

“Wolf Trap, Virginia.”

“Well, good news is you’re still in Wolf Trap. Bad news, I don’t think I need to tell you. Has this happened to you before, Ms. Graham? Past episodes of sleepwalking?”
“N-Nothing this bad, usually just – just in the yard,” she lies.

The cop nods again, scribbles another note down, and straightens. “We’ll drive you home, Ms. Graham, unless you’d like to make a stop at the emergency for your feet—”

Will refuses, absolutely not. They will look after her feet but they will also look for other things, anything that could cause confusion or sleepwalking; they would insist on keeping her, testing her, and it would take hours – Will hates hospitals.

“I’m f-fine, Officer,” she says, “I just st-started taking Restoril for sleep, I’ll call my doctor t-tomorrow to change my script. I don’t think it’s working quite right.”

“No,” the cop agrees, “it definitely is not.”

They let her keep the blanket when they get to her house. The windows are shrouded in darkness, the front door cracked open but barely visible in the deep night. She thanks the cops and ushers Winston inside. Tracks dirt and blood on her floors. Turns on all the lights to chase the shadows away. The dogs swarm around her in a mass of fur, seeking affection where Will can give none.

It takes the better part of the early morning to get spurs and small rocks removed from the flesh of her feet. She puts the lid on her toilet and sits on it, lathers her feet in Neosporin, wraps them in gauze. There are no phantoms before her, no apparitions from the bone-littered depths of her mind – but somehow, as she watches the blood-stained murky water wash down the drain, dread chills her at her core.

She has been unmoored, and she has no anchor.

“How did you feel about Abigail’s death, Will?” Alana certainly doesn’t beat around the bush.

“Guilty.”

“...because you couldn’t save her,” Alana completes.

“Because I felt like I killed her,” Will corrects, levelling Alana with open eyes. Can Alana handle the truth? “I got so close to him. I get too close, that’s the problem, isn’t it? Sometimes I would stop and think – and feel like we were doing the same thing at different times of the day. I felt like how he felt when he slept, and woke, and showered, and ate.”

Will can see small muscles in Alana’s jaw working as she processes what Will has just confessed. And then, after a moment, Alana asks her, “You felt this even after he was dead?”

Will nods.

“Like you were becoming him.”

Will smiles. It is a testament to Alana’s skill and professionalism that she doesn’t flinch at the shadows of Will’s demons. But then again, mere shadows are a far cry from the real thing. “I know
who I am, Alana. I am not Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

Alana looks at her for a moment, taps her pen twice, and then nods. She writes a short note down. “You look a little haunted today, Will.” She mentions it lightly, as if they were referring to the weather.

“There are nightmares lying coiled under my pillow, Dr. Bloom.”

“Why don’t you tell me about them?”

Will relaxes against the chair, tips her head back a tad. Closes her eyes. “Because telling you breathes them into reality.”

For Will, memory is an odd thing. She sees vividly because of her gift, but often her memory is not as chronological as her sight.

She met Alana Bloom at George Washington University in the fall. Will can remember that the skies were bright blue and the air was brisk. She was distracted that day – her new house was on the verge of closing; her classes had demanding timetables; her new flats were giving her pinky toe a blister – the scenery was the last thing on her mind. But if she thinks hard on it and with her eyes closed, that is what she remembers: the crisp scent of fallen leaves, the hum of a new city, the weight of the books in her arms. And then Alana’s smile.

This is not to say that Will never had any friends. She did, at least by the superficial standard of the word. She dare not ask for any more than that, nor should anyone, for such things as true and deep friendship are unheard of except in works of literature and the dreams of those who are unfortunate enough to long for them in real life. She grew up with a playmate in every new town, with an odd companion through the torture of high school, with roommates in college and sisters in the force.

But none of them came to her presence bristling with potential like Alana had. Alana walks along like that, a beacon to all those around her, a herald of good things, a breath of beauty. Will knew very well, even back then, that Alana didn’t treat her any differently as everybody else, nothing like that. It was (and is) all Will, poor Will, desperate Will, starved of significant human connections.

That was it. That was the point. Perhaps two decades of almost absolute emotional isolation is what got her into this mess in the first place.

At twenty-six, alone and reeling from yet another trauma, Will packed up her small one-bedroom and drove her car to Washington DC. Eighteen hours on the road but she felt good when she parked in front of a motel and stepped out to the cool air hitting her skin. The departure from Florida’s wet heat was so therapeutic she forwent a jacket and landed a cold within her first week. She picked up her first dog, Buster (but a pup, starved and beaten, abandoned, just like her) as she drove around looking for her place to stay.

A house, she decided, because no more dim apartments and strange neighbors, no more disturbances at odd hours of the night. Home should be home, a place of comfort, something small enough to be
cozy but spacious enough around to where she can keep a dog or two (or three or four). A sanctuary for her to run to if she wants to keep advancing in this career and stay sane.

And then school, she decided, because she is tired of working from the bottom of the food chain, tired of having limited privileges and shitty assignments. Sick of having to scream before anyone listens to what she has to say.

For as much as she knows that her empathy can easily destroy everything it touches, she cannot sit idly by and allow her skill to rot away without putting it to use. A sentiment that is a relic of her practical father in her, maybe, or otherwise just the arrogant assumption of youth.

The second week, she bought a house in Wolf Trap near the outskirts of Reston; the third week, she got accepted into the graduate program; it was on the fourth week, though, when she first met Alana.

“Are you one of Dr. Coben’s students?” Alana had asked a distracted Will, rather out of the blue. But her tone was bright and welcoming.

“Um. Yes?”

“Great! I caught you before you went in there,” Alana had smiled, stepping closer and curving her open arm like so to usher Will away from the building before them. “The lecture hall has a pipe leak of some sort when we went in there earlier, and maintenance had to block it off. There are no other halls large enough to hold the class in this timeslot, so Dr. Coben is holding class in the courtyard by the library. Fine day to be out, anyhow. –oh, I’m sorry, I’m Alana – Alana Bloom, one of Dr. Coben’s guest lecturers this semester.”

Will had found herself walking with Alana across campus, a few of her classmates ahead of them and behind, the sun shining bright above their heads. All the while, Will suffered self-consciousness in tight silence. Alana glowed (because it was her, definitely, and not the sunlight) in her wrap dress and chic boots and her long, wavy hair. Will in her beat-down bootcut khakis and brown flats and washed-out plaid oxfords. She can still remember the sharp sting of regret that she had opted not to wash her hair that morning. Alana’s mere presence had that effect on people, if they weren’t careful.

As the three-hour class commenced on the lawn that day, all twenty-six of them arrayed facing Dr. Coben and Dr. Alana Bloom, Will felt the birth of a yearning within her – for a connection or more, for a friend or more – and for the first time looked upon another human being with admiration born not of titles or achievements, but of simple attraction and the tantalizing possibility of a kindred mind.

All of the above considered, Will feels that her hesitation is well-founded. Confiding in Alana is a terribly intimidating prospect, made worse by the new definition on their otherwise nebulous relationship. Alana, to her, is almost a friend but not quite; should be her therapist but she doesn’t want that; a somewhat colleague; a mentor of sorts. Full of half-truths, the space between them.

She wraps her feet in soft gauze the next morning and takes two Advils for the pain. No calls to the doctor for her, but maybe new locks on the doors, a collar with a nametag for Winston if he insists on tagging along. Will is thinking about this when Jack calls at five-thirty in the morning, a considerably
decent time for once, so she leaves at six and is on site at seven.

“Room was registered to a John Smith,” Jack greets her, to which Will snorts.

“Appalling failure of imagination.”

“They paid cash, no security footage—”

“John Smith one of our vics?” Will asks despite already knowing the answer.

“We don’t know who our vics are, but we do know they were brutally mutilated and then displayed,” Jack fixes her an intense look.

“What?”

“I thought it might be the Ripper, but there were no surgical trophies,” Jack says. “I’m gonna need you to prepare yourself on this one, Will.”

Will squares her jaw. “I’m prepared.” Who does Jack think she is? Does she have a sign on her head that says ‘Caution: Unstable’?

“Well,” Jack huffs, turning back towards the room and ploughing on, “prepare yourself some more. You don’t look it. Where’s your head today?”

“On my pillow, Jack, I didn’t sleep.” Technically she did, but.

“This is just the thing to wake you up. There are no jurisdictional rivalries here, it’s all yours. They don’t have a clue what to do with it anyway.” Jack opens the door for her, and it would have been worthy of a gentleman, except no gentleman sends someone else to the gallows like Jack does with her.

Will gives Jack a look, steps inside, and stops.


They had wings. Wings of flesh, torn from their backs, lifted up to the heavens, spread open in glory. The two bodies were propped up on their knees, their hands folded before them in supplication. Bone glistening, blood blistering – Will walked closer, closer, around them to look at their faces. They were transformed.

“Hooks were bored into the ceiling,” Will hovers her fingers over the thin wires, “fishing lines used to hold up the bodies, the wings.”

Jack grunts. “At least we know he’s a fisherman.”

“Or a Viking.”

“Viking?”

“Vikings used to execute Christians by breaking their ribs, bending them back, and draping the lungs over them to resemble wings. They called it the blood eagle.” The heavy silence from Jack is telling. “Pagans mocking the God-fearing,” she continues, ignoring what little filter she has. Well, Jack already thinks her unstable, how much worse can it get?

Jack sighs, deep and unsatisfied. “Then who’s mocking who?”
“He isn’t mocking them; he’s transforming them.”

Will allows herself to see the stage: flesh separating from flesh as they rip open into wings, blood warm on her hands, on the skin. The victims, the fear, the pain – she pulls herself together and takes a deep breath. “I need a plastic sheet for the bed.”

Odd looks, but no one dares to question her. No one dares here, not in the presence of this… elevation of form. She needs to be where the killer was, feel what the killer felt. She can’t allow the victims to overwhelm her, they aren’t who she needs, and they are far past needing her – she needs the killer. The plastic wrinkles under her body. Madness slept here last night.

Will inhales, closes her eyes, and lets the pendulum swing.

Beverly and her team work wonders on the scene, augmenting Will’s partial profile with hard evidence. She listens to them discuss samples and the (im)precision of the cuts, the free histamine levels in the tissues they tested. The female victim lived for a short while after she was skinned – but hers was not the overpowering fear Will had felt on the scene.

“No matter how you look at this, everyone in that room was very upset,” Beverly remarks, face a grimace as she picks particulates from the torn flesh.

“Are we talking hardcore Judeo-Christian upsetting, or just upsetting in general?” Zeller snipes.

“This is a very specific upsetting. They aren’t praying to him,” she tells Jack, “they’re praying for him. He’s afraid.”

“Of what? What is somebody who could do something like this afraid of?”

Will puts her mouth to her coffee, withholds her words. Jack is a man of moral judgments, holds himself with a level of self-satisfied superiority. Lowering himself to understand the motivations of someone he deems as evil as this killer is not something he finds himself capable of. Or willing. No; that is Will’s job.


Will shrugs. “Could be for anything from itching and rashes to rare systemic inflammatory disorders, name it.”

“Since when were you an MD?” Zeller quips again, earning an elbow in the ribs from Beverly.

“Also, he’s on levetiracetam,” Beverly adds, “that’s Keppra, a medication for seizures,” and suddenly it makes sense.

Will straightens and puts her coffee down. “Dexamethasone to lower inflammation that’s causing the seizures – he has a tumor in his brain, and he has a limited time to live. He’s not punishing them or mocking them – he’s elevating them, making them into angels that will watch over him. He’s afraid of dying in his sleep, Jack. He’s afraid of death.”
The museum looks more like a museum in the daytime, with its usual patrons and none of the pretentious peacocks parading as they did that night she met Dr. Lecter. She tucks her jacket around her, hemming in the scarf tail that wants to escape. Alana would be so proud that her suggestion struck a chord in Will. The thought encourages a rueful smile to linger on her lips as she pays for the exhibit admission.

It takes a short while but eventually she gets there, the exact spot where Goya’s Saturn hangs on display – as if something supernatural draws her to the piece, draws her close to see. Museums are often confusing hallways of color for her eyes, partly why Will avoids them so much, but it takes her less than fifteen minutes to find Saturn despite being unfamiliar with the place. That probably means something terrible for her psyche.

She stands there for a while, absorbing the silence the same way the dark paint on the canvas absorbs light. If she mutes the sound of her breathing, she can even hear it: the crunching of bone under teeth, the sound of life being devoured by life. Will hears the sibilant rustle of thick hair, tufts of it as they were removed from pillowcases and cushions in the Hobbs house – the only remnant of Hobbs’ seven dead girls. They were sacrifices, surrogate daughters, the same way Saturn’s son is a sacrifice to the altar of his madness.

Will’s eyes flutter. Madness, subsumed in fear, worn like a mark of death. Red wings reaching up to the sky, over her eyes, covering the light, covering her mind. That dead couple in the motel room, the red of their torn flesh is the same red as the flesh of Saturn’s dead son.

“So you still see love, Will?”

Will jolts and turns.

“Dr. Lecter.”

She could have been dreaming, sleepwalking again, except she’s quite certain that her brain couldn’t have come up with the physicality of Hannibal Lecter approaching her at this moment. She checks her watch; it’s two in the afternoon.

“I have just finished what has turned out to be quite a stressful shift,” he says, “and decided – rather arbitrarily, truth be told – that I will end the day with beauty.” A shrug for an explanation.

Will looks closer and does see that the edges of his composure are made somehow softer by fatigue. He is still wearing a suit, three-piece, in dark midnight blue with minute patterns on expensive cloth. Grey shirt and chrome grey tie, pinstriped so finely it looks solid. Black leather oxfords, silver cufflinks, a silver wrist watch. His hair, the one detail detracting from perfection, has gotten loose of its hold, fringes falling over his brow while the rest is swept back by hand, almost casual.

_No doctor should look so distractingly good_, Will’s wayward brain whispers. She clears her throat, fidgets with her jacket sleeve. Turns and looks up at the painting again, at the rabid light in Saturn’s eyes. “Most would not consider this a reprieve, doctor.”

“Unfortunately, I am not most people,” he says, echoing her own words from the first night they met, “and I believe we have already discussed how I am just Hannibal.”
Will smiles, wry. “The letters after your name suggest otherwise, Hannibal Lecter MD PsyD FAAEM FESEM EMDM – wait, I think I’m missing one degree…”

“I am flattered that you remember all of them but one,” Hannibal is visibly amused, stepping closer towards the painting and towards her. “I’m very impressed. But,” he shrugs, “what are letters worth? They are mere titles. To shield myself with, against patients and colleagues, against the institutions I move amongst. But you are neither a patient nor a colleague.”

“No,” Will agrees, feeling good about not being a patient. “So what am I?”

“A friend, I would hope.”

Warmth curls in Will’s belly, a shiver of delight crawling up her spine. She shoves her hands into her pockets to mask it, turning her attention elsewhere. She feels terribly underdressed beside him: soft leather jacket, cheap and full of dog hair; hastily buttoned shirt, tucked into the next pair of jeans she could find; a fraying dark scarf she grabbed at random from her closet; leather boots that come up under her knees. Her boots are worn from long years of use, a pair she had picked with Alana’s help years ago when their tenuous friendship was in its infancy.

“No, it’s just—” she takes a deep breath before the plunge, “The term friendship is a sour one right now. I may have been too presumptuous.”

Well shit. Will’s bitterness over Alana is bleeding into everything. “No – no, it’s just—” she takes a deep breath before the plunge, “The term friendship is a sour one right now.”

Understanding dawns on Hannibal’s face. “You are suffering a loss.”

“Not the clean, final cut of a friendship ended properly,” Will confesses, “but the agony of a slow tearing apart. Like rope fraying under the hanging weight of a dead body.”

Silence.

“I’m sorry, that was a really morbid and highly inappropriate description.”

Hannibal chuckles. “Not at all – it was very vivid and incredibly efficient. Shall we forgo the sour term, then, and refer to ourselves as, perhaps, chance companions?”

Will looks down at her feet. “How about we forgo terms at all and just be?”

“Most people would be uncomfortable without such definitions.”

“But we have both agreed that we are not most people.”

Hannibal looks at her; Will looks at him. After a moment, Hannibal breaks out a small smile. Will has to duck her head and look away, avoid the heat that her body generates at the sight of that smile, or the shivers crawling along her spine would overwhelm her and she would embarrass herself.

She shifts the conversation. “What was so distasteful about your shift that Saturn’s folly is more preferable stimulation?”

“Human folly,” Hannibal replies, “often purposeless and infinitely more painful. Saturn – or Cronus, in the Greek – may have consumed his offspring, but they were eventually regurgitated back into the world of light. Not quite as easy to undo human folly.”

“I wouldn’t call regurgitation easy,” Will laughs quietly.
“I wouldn’t call resurrection easy either.”

Will turns to look at him. “Your patient didn’t survive?”

“We did everything we could,” Hannibal sighs, “but we are also human.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Will says, but her words ring hollow and Hannibal hears it.

“I think you have a bigger problem trying to make yourself believe those words, Will.”

She laughs. “Out comes the psychiatrist.”

“I’m sorry,” he sighs with a smile, “but observing is what we do. I can’t turn mine off any more than you can turn yours off.”

“We’d get along easier if you didn’t psychoanalyze me at every turn,” Will tells him, the bite in her tone unbidden. “You won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed.”

This time Hannibal turns towards her, tone stern. “I believe it is up to me to decide whether or not I like you.” And, with a gentler tone, “I am not one to shy away from hardships either. You would prefer it if we were to trade in truths, would you not?”

“No one ever trades only in truths. Everyone has something they want to hide.” Will has plenty.

“One can hide without lying,” Hannibal argues. “It is, in fact, a natural aspect of a growing relationship for certain things to be held in confidence, at least until further trust has been established. Finding solid ground as a prerequisite to laying foundations.”

Will tugs at her scarf tail. “Are we finding solid ground, Dr. Lecter?”

“No until you quit calling me by title,” Hannibal admonishes. He puts his free hand in his pocket and leans a little forward. “Perhaps some coffee and a snack will help convince you.”

Will looks around them. The museum is sparsely populated, just the occasional curio ambling about with distracted looks on their faces as they moved from piece to piece. She turns back to Hannibal and takes a look at him, gauging him. Measures his sincerity. “Why do you keep pushing, Dr. Lecter? We barely know each other.”

“You just answered your question. Is it so difficult to conceive of someone wanting to get to know you better?”

“It’s all too easy,” Will’s lips curl in distaste, “considering my own friend wants to study me for science. Became my friend because of it.” Hannibal’s face remains impassive; Will pushes harder. “I have a very specialized skillset of particular interest to professionals in your prior field; forgive me if I seem uncharitable.”

Hannibal considers her words. “Trust is much like a muscle; it has memory. One must practice it in order for it to grow stronger, but it will also remember every time it was strained or injured.” Suddenly, he straightens, draws himself up tall. “Let us trade in truths, then. I have heard your name within the psychiatric circles, but beyond the fact that you are a person of interest, I know nothing else about you except what you have chosen to divulge. All I see,” he says with limpid eyes, “is the vague shape of a kindred mind. And that, for me, is rare enough to be worth pushing for.”

Oh, she thinks.
Will, bless her tender heart, is *cowed* by the breadth of his honesty. She has gone long enough without it in her life that she has forgotten how it blinds. Alana was like that once. Is she willing to risk it again?

“Coffee and a snack, Will,” Hannibal pushes, gently, the way Will would guide her hand on a stubborn young pup. “Neutral territory, even – I won’t insist on cooking for you.”

Will’s eyebrows go up.

“I am very particular about what I put into my body,” Hannibal explains, “but I know of a small place nearby, if you have the time. And we can keep our conversations as neutral as you would like for them to be. We can talk about the weather, if it pleases you.”

Will sighs in defeat, hunches her shoulders. What else does she have to do with her afternoon? She’s given her contribution to the investigation, and all that is left to do is to wait for the team to narrow it down until they find their killer. She tells herself that there is so much to lose, so much pain in *trying* again, and yet—

And yet.

She turns away from the painting and takes a step, and another, Hannibal’s quiet footsteps following after her at a gentle pace. Outside, when they leave the museum, the air is brisk and the sky is a bright blue. A sudden breeze picks up her scarf tail and whips it behind her; when she turns to pull it back, Hannibal is smiling at her with such warm eyes. She forgets the cold.

“They roast fine beans here,” Hannibal tells her quite eagerly, “which, despite America’s professed love for the drink, is actually a rarity on this side of the pond.”

Will observes him, Hannibal Lecter MD et cetera with his fine suit and finer manners, a man of expensive taste. *You are the rarity*, she thinks. Her thoughts must have been loud.

“You think me an elitist,” he says, the corners of his eyes crinkling in good humor – very handsome. “Well,” he shrugs, “I will not deny it – I am a hedonist and elitist both. I try to surround myself with only the finest things in life. Hard to accomplish at times, but well worth the struggle.”

“Not one to shy away from hardships,” Will echoes, leaning back into her chair, a soft plush thing lined in expensive old leather. She folds her hands on her lap and picks at her fingernails with tiny motions, away from his sight. She’s afraid to touch the table; it’s pristine. “Enlighten me, doctor: what are the finest things in your life?”

Hannibal reclines, one arm still resting on the table, posture open and easy – artful, almost. He contemplates, “Art and beauty. Music. Food. The human mind, when honed and disciplined and attuned to the world around it. This world – a fragile one, certainly, but as beautiful as it is ephemeral.” He fixes her with warm hazel eyes. “Intelligent company.”

Will avoids his gaze. “Flattery.”

“Truth.”
A server comes bearing a tray with two cups of coffee, black for Will and espresso for Hannibal. There is also a miniature crème brûlée, just one, for Will. She eyes the sweet, but goes for the coffee, takes a mouthful of it – closes her eyes. Flavor explodes over her tongue, rich and layered, the coffee so well-rounded it practically caresses her palate. Notes of bright fruit, hints of sour cherry, a zest of lemon at the end for a clean aftertaste.

Hannibal is looking quite self-satisfied when she opens her eyes. “Delicious, isn’t it.”

“Alright,” Will smiles, “yes, it’s delicious. Thank you.” She takes another mouthful and then follows it with a nibble of the sweet. “Do you come here often?”

Hannibal shakes his head. “Very little time to go anywhere with how busy the hospital has been. We are, of course, more inundated by the day as winter approaches.”

“How come?”

“It is what I call the natural rhythm of the hospital: the halls empty out in the summer until winter comes along and brings everyone back in. Patient census trends upward this time of the year, and so does mortality. They are sicker and heal slower. One of the few remnants of how humans were before modern civilization: we do not fare well without the sun.”

“There are plenty of remnants of how we were before civilization,” Will argues, remembering her bloody angels. “Brutality. Fear. Moral judgments.”

Hannibal is quiet for a moment, long tapered fingers playing along the handle of his cup. “You make it very difficult to keep these conversations neutral, Will. I wonder at the exact nature of your work – what makes you think the way you do.”

_Evasive maneuvers, Will Graham. You can do this._ “I may think this way because of other things, not just work.”

“But work is where we spend more than half of our lives. It shapes us, as much as we might not want it sometimes. We take it with us. It leaves its marks, sometimes as bruises, sometimes as scars.”

“Is that why you quit psychiatry, doctor?”

“Can you blame me, Will?”

Will’s lip quirks. They both know she can’t. Her bruises and her scars are plain for all to see; what people don’t see are the nature of the beasts that inflicted them.

Will doesn’t know what possesses her, what pushes the words out of her mouth. She only hears herself saying it – “I profile for the FBI. Serial cases. Homicide.” She twists her hands. “Unpleasant work.”

“And thankless too, I assume, for the most part.”

“When I do good work, my boss claps me on the shoulder and gives me two more bodies.”

“About right,” Hannibal laughs. “One patient done, two more walk through the doors. Though I like to keep mine breathing, at least.” His laugh is easy and open, a short quiet sound that sends warmth down Will’s spine. She squirms in her seat, rolling a shoulder to banish the feeling.

Will opens her mouth, closes it, and then opens it again after a pause. “I was about to say that most people usually have a different reaction to _FBI_ and _profiler_, but I won’t have you quoting myself at
me again.” Her lips twist in a small smirk, foreign as the expression is to her. “You are not most people.”

Hannibal gracefully dips his head. “And neither are you. Perhaps we should cease from expecting most common reactions from each other. It would certainly make conversation easier.”

“Conversation is never easy,” Will frowns. “Spontaneous, interactive communication between two entities – it’s hard enough to spontaneously start it, much less to continue it.”

“You don’t seem to be having too much of a difficulty,” Hannibal observes with another sip.

Will smiles, small and sad. “My forts are sturdy and tall.”

“Born from the necessity of keeping things in or shutting things out?”

“Both.” Will looks up at him. “But they don’t seem to be holding up all too well against you, Doctor. Must be your past profession.”

Hannibal tilts his head, demurs. “My apologies. As I have said, you make it difficult to keep a neutral conversation.”

“Is there even really such a thing?” Will wonders, fingers playing at the handle of her cup in a subconscious mimicry of Hannibal earlier. “Can you call it conversation if it’s so – so –”

“Bland?” he responds. “I am inclined to say no, but there are some others who would protest.”

“Others,” Will spits, “are overrated.”

Maybe it’s the vehemence in her tone; Hannibal laughs again, reclines back in his chair and allows the corners of his eyes to crinkle. He leans against one arm of the chair, remarks, “I see we are given to strong opinions.”

Will casts her eyes down at her lap. She smooths a palm against the fading thigh of her old jeans. “One doesn’t last in my field without strong opinions.”

“As strange as it sounds, I think we are beginning to draw some parallels between our disparate professions,” he says, “but enough about work. Tell me what you think about the exhibit.”

“Morbid,” is the first word out of her mouth, followed by, “tragic, and ironic.” A wave of mixed emotions sweeps over her; she feels it cresting like a wave, forceful, within her chest. “Disappointment. Amusement. Levity.”

When she looks up, Hannibal is peering at her, expression intense, eyes soft. “You have the most interesting words to describe Goya’s work – and I am curious to hear you articulate your logic. I must admit; I was very disappointed when I couldn’t find you at the gala after we were interrupted. The first person I have met to have a fresh, unusual perspective, not one born of parroting what other critics say – imagine my delight when I met you again, by pure chance.”

“And of course my job title has nothing to do with your interest,” Will snorts.

Exactly two seconds after she says it, she curses her mouth.

“Sorry. That was rude.”

“It was.” His tone is neutral; Will sighs and closes her eyes. “But you have the insight to know it and the grace to apologize for it. Quite alright. We all have reflex reactions to the stereotypes imposed
“Thank you.” It’s all Will knows to say.

They have a pause of silence, during which Will fights not to fidget and keeps her eyes downcast. A wind blows down the street, ruffling her hair and scarf. It really is a touch too cold to be sitting outside but neither of them seem to care. Somehow the silence morphs into something less awkward and more companionable after a minute of contemplation.

“Around the corner from Saturn and his son,” Hannibal resumes, low and thoughtful, “are a set of 80 prints called Los Caprichos – ‘The Caprices’. One of them in particular I think would suit you very well. Over our few conversations,” he says cautiously, “I have gathered that you have as frequent encounters as I do with human folly, so I think you will appreciate the irony, the truth, in the statement it makes. It is the 43rd in the series; Goya called it El sueño de la razón produce monstruos. The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters.” (1)

His pronunciation flows, vowels over foreign consonants like water over smooth stones. Will blinks once, twice, looking up at him and meeting his eyes for the fraction of a second, before fixing at a spot on his left cheekbone.

“Sounds like another morbid piece,” she remarks.

“It’s quite tame, actually, in comparison to Saturn.”

Will nods. “I will look at it the next time I go.”

“Please do,” Hannibal smiles, “and tell me what you think.”

Will would have gone to see the Goya print, but she had to return to Quantico for her evening lecture. She covers religiously themed murders, somewhat apt, and suffers through impassioned and entirely naive remarks from her students. None of them understand death; none of them have seen what it can do.

After the class, she swiftly puts away her things to head home. She has no notes on her desk, having lectured purely from memory; only the laptop has to be unplugged and tucked into her bag. She’s almost done when she catches a whiff of a familiar perfume: a deep nectar-and-wood scent that she knows will recede into a lingering trail of airy florals. (2)

“I heard you made a breakthrough with your investigation,” Alana says, leaning a hip against her desk with a smile. “Congratulations.”

Will snorts, coiling the power cord up into a neat circle. “Not sure how much of a break it is. How do you profile somebody who has an anomaly in their head changing the way they think?”

“Well,” Alana shrugs contemplatively, “a tumor can definitely alter brain function. Significantly. Even cause vivid hallucinations. But maybe what drives your angel maker to create heaven on earth is a simple issue of mortality. Can’t beat God, become him.” Alana takes a pause, and then says, “You said he was afraid.”
“He feels abandoned.”

“How do you know that makes him feel afraid? Ever feel abandoned, Will?”

Will’s shoulders are rigid lines. “I believe we’ve already discussed this.”

Alana hums, pauses again. Will waits for the blow.

“What were your expectations of the FBI?”

“Jack hasn’t abandoned me, if that’s what you’re implying. Not in any discernible way.”

“Perhaps in the way gods abandon their creations?” Alana suggests cheekily. She tries to inject some humor into her tone. It falls flat against the associations being called behind Will’s forts. She continues, “You say he hasn’t abandoned you, but you’re suffering nightmares every night, less than four hours of sleep on average, barely eating regular meals as it is, and before you know it you’ll be hallucinating or sleepwalking from stress. It’s not healthy, Will.”

Will tries not to flinch, tries not to give it away. Alana has always been against her reinstatement, and per her professional judgment Will is not truly fit for duty. Will realizes that she owes Alana at least the truth for the fact that she’s being allowed to continue on the field, but she can’t bring herself to say it. She won’t say it. Speaking her doubts makes them into truths.

Alana sighs. “I just don’t want us to wait until you get too unstable, Will. Please promise me you’ll tell me if and when you need help.”

“Of course, Alana. I will.”

Alana doesn’t specify what help she means; Will doesn’t push her.

Will goes home.

The dogs are eager to get out; they bound towards the woods the moment she opens the door. She walks with them for a while, leaving her doors open, feeling safer in the falling darkness than she’s ever been in the light. She looks back at the house, its white walls and grey roof: it glows like a beacon out at sea.

That night, she falls asleep in her living room, head pillowed on her arms, hunched over the desk. Her dreams are fluid motions of darkness and color, shadows dancing around her, murmurs in her ears rising and falling like the tide. She wakes up in the middle of the night, 3:37 and full dark, when Georgie sits unceremoniously on some of her papers that fell to the floor. She needed to grade those.

Will gently nudges Georgie to move aside, offers her feet for the dog to lie on as she retrieves her papers. They wrinkle and crunch when she tries to flatten them.

“Georgie, I think your pawprint won’t count for an official grade on these.” Georgie tilts her head. “I know, you’re cute and you didn’t mean it because you didn’t know it was important.” Well. Maybe a pawprint is enough of a grade, if going by the opening statement Will can read under her fingers.
She rolls her neck to work a knot loose; the back of her neck prickles with cold. The windows aren’t open when she turns to check them, but there’s a chill in the room somehow. Apart from Georgie, all the dogs are huddled on the couch or by the grate. Her dreams linger.

Closing her eyes, Will tries to catch the last images of her dream. It feels like water slipping through her fingers, but she has the hazy image of her own sleeping form curled over her desk – she looks upon herself in the dream, an out-of-body experience, and watches as the shadows grow. They grow from behind her, around her, underneath her – they extend upwards to the ceiling, wrapping around her slumbering form in a morbid embrace. If she tries hard enough, she can see a faint outline, tendrils or vines, maybe horns, protruding from the dark. The more she looks, the thicker the shadows get, until they are an inky, sinister black – and then they scatter into flying fragments, and she wakes up.

Thump.

Georgie nudges her with some strength, driving her chair to bump against the desk. Will blinks, and blinks again. Flickering shadows persist in the corners of her vision. She looks at the clock – 3:45. Oh, she thinks, I cat napped.

Shaking the sensation of bats or birds or butterflies fluttering around her head, she stands up and gathers her papers. All of her dogs raise their heads, swivel to look at her, check if she’s okay. Will makes a mug of coffee and lies down on the couch with Georgie and Winston. She stays awake until the ceiling crawls with sunlight.

She’s on her way home from Quantico when Jack calls. Her grip tightens on her steering wheel as she collects the address from Jack and takes the next exit to turn around. Another victim, and so soon after the last one: their killer is escalating, and fast.

When she arrives on site, she can almost taste the desperation in the air, the fear, thicker and even more palpable the closer she walks to the displayed corpse.

And what a display indeed. The police are skirting the scene like spooked animals.

“Why angels? Is it a religious statement of some sort? Does he think these people aren’t being religious enough?” Jack wonders aloud, logic leaning towards a vigilante killer.

“Whatever statement it is, it isn’t biblical.” Jack gives her a look; Will explains. “Angels don’t have wings in scripture; they only do in paintings and sculptures.”

“He’s drawing from secular sources?” Jack asks, but Jack is asking the wrong questions.

“His mind is turning on him,” Will says in an attempt to redirect him, “and there’s no one to help. He may already be hallucinating, hearing voices, seeing visions – depending on how advanced the tumor is, how much inflammation it’s causing in the brain.”

Jack flattens his lips but doesn’t respond for a moment, instead walking away from the corpse. Will nods to the nearby team of techs to signal them to take the body down. She’s seen all she needs to see; it’s not much different from the first one. But something catches her eye as she scans the
“Jack.”

He takes a look at the pieces of flesh at her feet and blinks. “He castrated himself.”

“Angels don’t have genitalia, Jack. He’s done making others into angels, he’s getting ready to become one himself.”

“So he was afraid of dying. Now, he’s what, getting used to the idea?”

Jack is an incredibly astute profiler, particularly when it comes to sussing out people – but sometimes, Will finds him terribly ill-equipped to handle the more extreme cases of behavioral disorders. Jack dwells so comfortably in the realm of normal people to be able to fully understand the workings of the killers he works to catch. Will supposes she shouldn’t complain; Jack’s incapacity is her job security.

“I don’t know, Jack. He’s still afraid.”

Jack tries again. “Well, he’s not just killing them when he’s sleepy. How is he picking them? We need to consider a victimology to complement his profile.”

Will sighs, pressing at the bridge of her nose. Her head is pounding, and she just took an aspirin. “I really don’t know, Jack. Ask him.”

“I’m asking you, Graham.”

Something in Will frays and thins, like a thread pulled too tight, threatening to snap. “You’re the head of the behavioral science unit, Jack, you tell me. Why don’t you come up with your own answers if you don’t like mine.”

Jack spins on his spot, coat and nostrils flaring wide. Will can’t help but be reminded of an incensed bull, rearing to charge at her, to gore her with horns in anger. She idly wonders if her flesh would bleed the same red as the bloody angel still suspended over their heads.

“I did not just hear that!” he yells; some police officers standing by turn to look at them. “Did I just hear that, Graham?”

“Um,” Will blinks, “no, you didn’t. Sorry.”

He stands there for a moment, breathing heavily, and after a while spins again to stalk away in wordless fury. Perhaps he saw something of the startled alarm on Will’s face. The sharp snap of his voice is still ringing in her ears, and soon after he leaves, she feels the slow burn of shame creep up her neck. She looks down at her feet, swallows the bile in the back of her throat, and somehow manages to keep the tears at bay. If they’re tears of frustration or indignation or just her simple misery, she doesn’t know, and neither does she care. She won’t show her weakness here.

Will inhales and lifts her head, trudges along back to her car. She’s almost there when Beverly blocks her path.

“Girl,” Beverly starts, disbelief plastered all over her face, “I have never ever ever heard anybody talk to Jack like that. I think even his wife wouldn’t dare!”

“I was out of line.”
“You were out of your mind.” Will’s jaw trembles with the effort not to flinch. “Holy shit, my ears rang like the first time I heard my mom use the f-word.” Will snorts; Beverly quirks a smile. “You ok, though? I know it’s a stupid question considering that none of us could be ok doing what we do, but,” she shrugs, eyes lingering over the corpse the CSI team is pulling down, “anyway, are you ok?”

“Why?” Will asks, “do I seem different?” Do you see me unstable too?

Beverly crosses her arms. “You’re a little different, but you’ve always kinda been. Brilliant strategy; that way no one ever knows when something’s up with you.”

She means well, she really does; Will can see it projecting from her words, echoing good intentions, concern for a friend. So Will tries very hard not to show how much those words sadden her. It illuminates the truth of her loneliness – that no one would know, no one would ever know the truth about her. Not even Alana, who only sees the shadows – the aftermath – of the spectres that haunt her.

“Thanks, Beverly. I think I’ll go home now. Get some sleep, you know.”

“Yeah,” Beverly says, “nothing else here anyway, looks about the same as the last one except for the, you know, castrated bits. Besides, you look like you need the sleep.”

Will nods along, slips into the relative warmth of her car and fires the heater up. On the freeway, she sees shadows flitting along at the edge of her vision, deer or ducks or stray dogs perhaps, and feels the cold radiating from within her bones.

She could have looked it up on the internet. She didn’t have to drive to Baltimore. But after a whole day of unsuccessful attempts at sleeping, she decided to put her time to better use. Hannibal would be proud that she honors the piece with her attention in person.

She walks into the museum, ghosting through the quiet hallways until she gets to Saturn, whose desperation and fear wafts poignantly from his imperious perch on the wall. Will stops, regards him, and remembers the bloody angels. Wordlessly she continues on, around the corner and into a longer, darker hallway. There are rows upon rows of framed prints, spotlights washing their dark ink with light, making the ominous images stand out in vivid detail. She is the only one here.

Will stops and reads the detail on the wall: ‘Los Caprichos are a set of 80 prints in aquatint and etching published as an album in 1799, a medium for Goya’s condemnation of the follies of Spanish society in his day. Goya spoke against the ignorance of the ruling class and their corresponding impotence, the widespread and pervasive reach of superstition, and the decline of rationality. His work was considered a momentous achievement, a tour-de-force critique of 18th century Spain, and humanity in general.’

She observes the grim images from a distance; they aren’t capricious at all. In fact, they seem to her as fine renderings of the constant and unwavering follies of human nature: bigotry, willful ignorance, irresponsibility, and the fatal belief that a human being is far more than what they are.

Will counts and walks, passes by image after disturbing image, until she comes to the 43rd piece,
positioned eye-level in the middle under a bright spot of light. She looks at it: the image of a person bent over a desk, shadows of winged creatures fluttering behind it in the dark. It is familiar to her.

Inhale. Exhale. Her fingers tremble.

The translated epigraph underneath it says: ‘Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels.’

She is looking at an image of herself.

REFERENCES

(1) The chapter title is from Francisco Goya’s piece *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, which Will has adequately described above. Owls are a symbol for folly and bats for ignorance. Goya’s strong opinions on the social and political state of Spain in his time is intended to be reflective of a number of things going on in this chapter, on Will and Jack and also a little bit on Hannibal’s side. But far be it for me to spoon-feed you the brain-stuff. Half the fun of Hannibal fics are the layers and layers of symbols!

(2) Alana’s perfume is Giorgio Armani’s *Si* perfume.
fuseki

Chapter Summary

In which there is intrigue, hospital politics, blatant disregard for protocol, and sweet late-night conversations where Will has no clue.

Chapter Notes

A Hannibal chapter for all of you sweet things! Excuse the delay, my lazy butt of an editor procrastinated on her paper and had to crunch on the last minute, pushing Saturn to the sidelines. (Yep, it's all her fault. And she's shameless about it. *sigh*) Prepare for politics and a lot of medical jargon. There are lengthy footnotes. Remember that there is Pinterest page and also some music.

Disclaimer: I am fully aware that Hannibal is committing some inexcusable deviations from proper medical protocol in this chapter - those who are somewhat medically savvy will spot that. Let's suspend our disbelief and remember that this is Hannibal Lecter, guys. He can do whatever the fuck he wants and run away with it, including (haha!) mass murder.

Oh, and a useful tip: HOVER OVER THE FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO SEE THE TRANSLATION.

fuseki • 布石
—a set of board opening moves in a game of go, which, depending on the player, can be a territorial or influence-oriented (sente / gote) approach.

"They're not going to like this," his resident mutters while reaching over the patient for the suction. Hannibal notes the amount of blood they have seen and turns to the nurse.

"Agnes, let's get another two units started, please." Momentarily his hands leave the patient, as he strips off the top pair of gloves – too slick, his grip on the scalpel sliding a precious few centimeters with each slice – and replaces them with a fresh sterile set. Flexing his fingers, he takes the scalpel again. "No, they won't," he agrees with his resident, "but neither will the family if the patient has to return to the theater for a second thoracic operation, and neither will I if my hard work is wasted when he dies in the ICU of an entirely unrelated MI."
A sharp crack echoes in Hannibal's ears as they slice past the sternum, separating two thin halves of bone to reveal the patient's sluggishly beating heart. "Retractor." His resident attaches the rib spreaders and cranks the lever to retract the bones, allowing him more space to work. He examines the red and heaving organ with narrow-eyed delight; his surgical mask hides a smile that is perhaps a tad too thrilled to be appropriate. "We will have to perform an on-beat considering the co-morbidities of this patient and the lack of preparation." Hannibal looks up to his resident, and then to the scrub nurse, who, in an act of keen intelligence, has apparently called for a second nurse to assist. "Have we administered the heparin?" (1)

"Yessir, on it," Agnes the nurse responds, just as his resident splutters, "On-beat? Dr. Lecter, I have to protest, this is highly unorthodox—"

"Very well, then; you are dismissed. Send Reizei in here to relieve you."

His resident, a trying creature to work with even at his best, splutters for a moment more before stalking out of the operating theater in a huff. Hannibal continues his work, lowering himself to near eye-level with the patient's chest as he lifts flesh from bone and works his forceps to grasp the root of the left internal mammary artery. Once secure, he guides the laser scalpel to sever and cauterize the vessel, then slowly sideways to separate the vessel from the fatty tissue securing it to the inner chest wall.

In the fifteen quick minutes it takes him to harvest the two mammary arteries, Reizei Yuriko, his other resident (2) whose name is worth remembering for her competence, arrives in a swirl of sterile robes and rapid-fire Japanese. "Nani ga attandesu ka, sensei? Benjy looked in tears!"

"56-year-old African-American male," Hannibal reports, "with three gunshot wounds, two to the chest and one to the leg. All the bullets have been removed and we have repaired the penetrating trauma to his diaphragm, but his troponin is atrocious, his ejection fraction should be higher than it is, and his T-wave is upright in V1." (3)

"Ah sou," Yuriko blinks, holding her arms and hands above her waist, sterile, while the nurse ties her gown secure. "Zannen."

She briskly takes her place across from Hannibal and allows the OR tech to return to his actual job. Hannibal allows a small smile for her quick intelligence and lack of complaint. "Kite kurete arigato, Reizei-kun. I appreciate your presence." (4)

As always, whenever they converse in her native language, Yuriko brightens, her carefree, chipper manner lighting up the room. "Mais bien sûr! I wouldn’t miss this for anything – not even for that really interesting MVA that’s coming in – hotondo no bai shinzoubyougakuka ni azukeru kara kono shujutsu miru no wa hisabisa. Il n’est jamais enneuyeux avec vous, sensei.”

Hannibal smiles, allowing her multilingual chatter to wash over him as he positions the stabilizers around the ailing heart. Her transnational upbringing shines through whenever she exercises her languages; she switches between them with fluid ease. It is always a comfort for him, having that resting knowledge that a scholarly mind, albeit still young and developing, is nearby. He can rest easy in her assistance; the rest of the surgery should proceed just fine.

Switching gloves yet again for a firmer grip, he flexes his hand and hovers the blade above the heart. It beats slow and steady. Narrow pupils trained on its motion, Hannibal synchronizes his breath with its rhythm, and, as the ventricles relax in repolarization, he swoops in and makes the first cut.
“Amazing,” Yuriko shakes her head, “just absolutely amazing.”

Hannibal smiles. “Visualization is key. It will take time, but I believe you have the aptitude to master the technique. I have said it before, a solid grasp of anatomy—”

“—is the key to pathology and surgery. hai, sensei,” the girl nods, tendrils of black hair bouncing around her face. Her eyes have that fervent shine in them that tells Hannibal she is reimagining his technique and committing every detail to memory. A remarkable mind to be sure; Hannibal delights in finding and honing the few gifted ones like her.

Hannibal rinses his arms in hot water and towels dry. Behind them, a team of housekeepers are trooping into the empty theater to prepare it for the next patient. An MVA (5) with traumatic brain injury, if his memory serves him. His twenty hours will be swift today.

“Sensei, I know you don’t appreciate this sort of talk, but I feel a responsibility to tell you,” Yuriko says, tone low and still casual despite the ominous weight of her words. “Benjy will bring official complaints to the director and other faculty physicians. He’s been gathering support for a few weeks now – I’m sure none of this comes as news to you, but – one of his accusations is going to be favoritism and biased judgment. He’ll make it sound like I’m sleeping with you to set myself at an advantage.” She pauses, biting her lip. “God, that sounds even worse when I say it aloud; I’m so sorry.”

Hannibal has to fight to hide the extent of his amusement. Nonetheless, he cannot help a small smile, the sharp kind, which seems to only serve as reassurance to his young protégé. He can see her stance relax minutely.

“Those who are lesser – be it in talent or dedication or intelligence, and in Benjamin Srinath’s case it is unfortunately all three – will always seek ways to put themselves above those who are above them. In this case, they attempt to do so by suborning you through slander.” Hannibal pats her shoulder comfortably. “It is quite a common phenomenon in the politics of the morally delicate medical field. One cannot engage in outright perjury, thievery, or murder, lest one lose his license; therefore one must be creative.”

Yuriko sighs. “Implying that I’m crawling into bed with you isn’t very creative.”

“No, but it’s evocative enough an image that people will gossip about it,” Hannibal agrees. They walk together to the dictation room, where most physicians sit and pore through patient charts away from the continuous controlled chaos of the nurses’ stations. “This wouldn’t be the first time they would level such accusations against me, Reizei-kun; rest assured I’ve dealt with this before.”

More times than Hannibal can count now, some cases stronger than others – though only one case comes to mind that will be as strong a case as this one.

“Have they actually managed any lasting damage?” Yuriko, the ever-curious child, continues to prod and poke, rarely heeding social boundaries and conventions about when it is inappropriate to ask such invasive questions. This is one of the many reasons Hannibal likes her, and one of her many attributes that serve to isolate her from her peers. “Has there been a case where they really thought your judgment was compromised?”

Hannibal chooses to be honest. “There was one, some years ago,” he tells her, “back when I was still in psychiatry. I had a protégé then, as smart and capable as you.” Alana, he remembers, was also a singularly curious mind. But delicate, and far too… moral.
Humming in interest, Yuriko casts him a sly sideward smirk. “Namae gurai kuremasen ka? You know, to whet my curiosity?”

“You, child, need to redirect that curiosity to the next case,” Hannibal scolds. “Go see the status on that MVA case, I want an ETA if they even have one. I may let you lead on that one, if you behave yourself.”

She laughs and skips away, momentarily reassured that he has all things in hand. “I don’t know what you mean, sensei; I’m always well-behaved!”

Hannibal separates from her at a junction of the hallway where it splits from the operating suites to the emergency department. Yuriko is always well-behaved, if a bit excitable at times, and also quite a proficient hermit. Most if not all of the department knows that she spends her time at home with her cats and her books if not at work. There should be no problems forthcoming on her side. As for his own side…

Dr. Michael Albertson, the department medical director and Hannibal’s direct superior, is a contemporary of his from medical school and residency. He is one of the more regular guests at Hannibal’s dinner table, along with his wife, the kind and ever-enduring Dr. Susan Albertson. Hannibal is quite confident his word will weigh more when pitted against the paltry accusations of a middling resident doctor not even competent enough to know his place in the pecking order. That, however, doesn’t prevent him from picking up one of Benjamin Srinath’s business cards from the dictation room’s long table.

Over and over he flips the card in his hand, sitting back and thinking on possible courses of action. Benjamin Srinath’s accusations are unconscionably rude when Yuriko has offered him nothing but kindness and companionship. However, it would not do to attract undue attention by ridding the world of his existence too soon. So Benjamin will get the opportunity to submit his complaints, and Hannibal will deal with it like he always has.

Except Yuriko – her reputation will still suffer, if Hannibal doesn’t interfere. He senses that this particular scandal will throw bigger ripples than other ones have in the past, what with how close they are perceived to be. And he will not deny it, he is rather fond of the girl, as rare and intelligent as she is – and though the fondness is entirely platonic on both ends, people will not see it that way. The nurses already talk.

Either he cuts ties with her entirely, like he did for Alana Bloom, or –

His phone rings, muffled, in his pocket.

Fishing it out, he checks the screen and has to smile. What perfect serendipity. He answers, “Hello, Will.”

A soft, startled sound. “Dr. Lecter, hi,” Will responds, as if she were the one answering the call. “I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“You are not. I have only just finished an operation; you have perfect timing.” Indeed, Hannibal thinks, giving me a solution I hadn’t thought of before.

A bit of radio silence, and then, “I saw the print today. The Goya print you were telling me about.”

“You did now,” Hannibal smiles, pleased. “What did you think of it?”

He can hear dogs in the background, distant barking, and a rustling that could have been the wind in Will’s clothes or hair. “All too apt, Dr. Lecter.”
“How come?”

She sighs into the phone. Hannibal can almost see her face, forehead crumpled in some phantom pain she carries with her wherever she goes. It would make for a beautiful study in chiaroscuro. Hannibal’s hand flexes.

“Sometimes what I do is not very good for me,” she says, deliberate and slow. “Unfortunately, I am good for it.”

Her confidence in her own ability doesn’t smack of hubris like such a statement would on other people; she says it as a mere statement of fact. Endearing. Hannibal relaxes into the chair, looking out through the window at the darkening streets of Baltimore. Of the few things he misses about psychiatry is this: the conversations with the rare tortured mind. “Are there monsters in your dreams, Will?”

“No,” she pauses. “No, there are monsters when I am awake.” And then, after a huff of air, “Sorry, I don’t even know why I’m telling you this. I’m wasting your time.”

“Quite alright,” Hannibal reassures her. “I have been told that I need variety in how I spend my time. And as I have said before, you fascinate me.”

“You haven’t,” Will protests feebly, “said that before, I mean.”

“Have I not? Well. Now I have.”

The silence is longer this time. Hannibal listens to the faint static, imagines where she must be, how she must look in her acute discomfort, this captivating creature he stumbled upon on pure chance.

“Why do you do this?” she asks, her voice hushed and almost inaudible. Hannibal wishes they were having this conversation in person, so he could savor the emotions she isn’t even aware she projects.

“Do what, Will?”

“This,” she says, annoyed. “You know what I mean.”

Hannibal doesn’t respond, giving her time to articulate herself, but sporting a teasing smile that she cannot see.

“You barely know me. Obviously you haven’t read Freddie Lounds yet, or you’ll be running the other direction.”

“I have, actually,” he chuckles. “Read Freddie Lounds.”

“Oh, have you.” The antagonism in her voice is like nails on a chalkboard.

“Yes. Interesting material, if a bit sensationaly done.”

Will snorts. “A bit, he says.”

“I took the liberty of a little research after our talk the other day. Some exciting reading to do over my otherwise dull shift.”

“Oh, I’m sure it was interesting.”

Shifting in his chair, Hannibal swivels around and glances at the clock. He has some more time to spare, if Yuriko is doing her job as she always does. “Ms. Lounds has been very rude—”
“—understatement of the century, that—”

“—calling your gift such names,” Hannibal continues with a hum. “Simply unforgivable.”

“Ah,” Will breathes into the phone, as if a revelation has come upon her. “So you’re on the ‘gift’ side of the argument.”

“Do those who know of your abilities often divide into two?” Hannibal asks, already knowing the answer. Of course they do. “I would imagine this is why you are so valuable to the FBI as a profiler. Empathy like yours is extremely rare and unprecedented.” He pauses. “Of course, you have already heard all of this and are listening to me with much annoyance.”

Will clicks her tongue. “Bored would be the word, not annoyed.”

“Dear me,” he responds, huffing softly, “boring won’t do. I would rather like you to find me interesting and worth your time.”

A faint rustling-scratching sound, as if the phone is rubbing against a rough texture. “I’m the one who should be wondering why I’m worth your time, Dr. Lecter.”

“Hannibal,” he firmly insists.

“Hannibal,” she concedes.

“Thank you.” He puts his resident’s business card down on the table and contemplates his next words carefully. Courting Will Graham, it would seem, is much like hunting a prey with the instincts and senses of a fellow predator. “You are worth my time because I find you interesting. I have said this in the past, before I knew of your abilities through Ms. Lounds’ detestable excuse for journalism – I will say it again. I find you interesting as a person. While I cannot deny that your abilities have increased this interest, it is not rooted there. Were you without your empathy, I believe I would still be interested in your perspective.”

Radio silence on the line. Will remains wordless, the barking dogs in the distance the only tell that she’s still there.

“You should also know,” Hannibal decides to add, “that it gives me great sadness to see how hesitant you are to form a friendship.” And it does, surprisingly, entice sadness and disappointment in him to see such remarkable minds go to waste. Part of the reason he picks up his protégés. But Will is something different – has always been different from the very start.

Another rustling sound. “I – I didn’t use to be. I mean, I was, I used to be, I don’t know – more agreeable? I suppose, I don’t know, I just—”

Hannibal sighs, soft enough so Will can hear it. “My apologies. I shouldn’t push.”

“No,” Will says, a little too sharply, and then gentler, “no, I – you should. I appreciate the honesty. You’ve been – one of only two people who have been honest with me as of late.” Hannibal wonders who the other person is.

“Are they being dishonest because of their own designs, or because they see you as the fragile little teacup?”

He has managed to startle Will into laughter; he finds he likes the sound. Small, a bit uncomfortable, warm. “Teacup,” she chuckles, “definitely.”
“Well, how rude of them.”

Success: Will laughs again. “You’re detracting the conversation by making me laugh,” she accuses.

“I get the impression that you don’t have nearly enough levity in your daily life, Willow Graham. I am simply remedying a problem.”

A soft noise, half-surprised and half contemplative. Hannibal swivels in his chair and waits for her to gather her thoughts, pinning his phone between an ear and a shoulder as he wakes one of the computers up with a wave of his badge on the scanner. He should be charting his procedure notes now if he wants to leave here on time, but he can’t bring himself to focus on the job at hand – not when the faint rustling on the other side of the phone is making him wonder what Will is doing. Hannibal finds himself so distracted he almost misses the warning churn of instinct in his gut.

But Will’s words detract him from all of it. “I hope you’re not taking me up as a pet project, Dr. Lecter, or you will have your work cut out for you.” She sighs. “I know I keep asking after your intentions – it’s not that I doubt your honesty – but I think, even though you say you are after friendship, that you are in fact aiming for something more than that.” She pauses. “Excuse my presumption if I’m wrong.”

Hannibal doesn’t have to wonder, he knows how much courage it took her for the words to leave her mouth. She is not a forward woman, Willow Graham – reticent, in fact, and hesitant – but she will do what it takes to protect herself. Tall and sturdy forts, indeed.

“Do you have objections, if I were aiming for something more?”

“Well, are you?”

Hannibal hums, considers. Learning her is much like trying to solve a rubik’s cube that has a mind to fight back – colors ever shifting, turning, to dislodge his attempts.

“Friendship,” he tells her, “is always a firm foundation for whatever proceeds next.”

She snorts, soft and somewhat inelegant. “Trust the psychiatrist to have a roundabout noncommittal answer.”

Very well, then. Hannibal decides to be direct. “You understand my meaning well enough. Is it too forward of me then to invite you for a casual dinner?”

Static noise, dogs barking, coming closer, and the wind.

“Most people would find a restaurant of repute and spend a night out, but we have agreed that we are not most people. I, for one, would relish the chance to cook for you, and you, I think, would enjoy it far less if we were in the midst of a crowd.”

“I –” she inhales, long and loud, loud enough for Hannibal to hear. “I’m—”

After another pause, Hannibal grants her some mercy. “No need for an answer now, Will. But you’ll give my invitation a serious consideration, at least?”

“I – of course, I will, I just – um, I’ll get back to you.”

“Good,” Hannibal says, “I’m glad,” and he finds that he isn’t lying.
“For the first time in a long while,” Hannibal contemplates, “I see the possibility of friendship.”

Across from him, elegant and glacial, Bedelia tilts her eyebrow in an expression of surprise. “Is there someone new in your life?” she asks. They haven’t seen each other in more than three weeks, and often Hannibal is too occupied for much recreation; her surprise is well-founded.

“I met someone. Not a colleague, not a patient. Perhaps it was fate.”

This time, both her eyebrows tilt in surprise. At least one of them is entertained; Hannibal has been pondering this for days. “You are not one to believe in such things, Hannibal.”

“No,” he agrees. The wine in his glass needs refilling, an uncommon occurrence; he usually curtails his alcohol in her presence, in light of past events. “We see the world in different ways, Will and I. And yet, I believe she can assume my point of view.”

Astute as ever, Bedelia nails the issue with her next question. “What does she do, this new friend of yours?”

Hannibal almost grins. “She profiles the criminally insane for the FBI.”

Bedelia is now very amused. Hannibal can see it in the way she tilts her wineglass, the way her body angles towards him on the right and leaning forward. “It feels good when someone sees us, Hannibal. Particularly when they can understand what they see.”

Hannibal nods. “I find it reassuring.” Reassuring in a way nothing else in the world has been for a very long time. “And intriguing, of course.”

Inclining her head in acknowledgement, Bedelia smiles. It is a small thing, easy to miss for some, except it gleams sharp as a knife for Hannibal’s eyes. She leans back in her chair, allowing her long golden hair to settle on the slope of her shoulder. Her next words are what stays with Hannibal for the rest of the night.

“Now, if they choose to understand what they see,” she says, “that is the question.”

Baltimore is an old city, older than most though perhaps not the most sizable or notorious. The cobbled streets of his neighborhood remind Hannibal of Paris, in particular when the nights are darker, giving the streetlamps a stronger, more golden glow. Outside, dusk is darkening the clear skies. There are people about, basking in the late evening: a couple on their after-work jog, a young lady walking her dog while talking on the phone, some Asian tourists driving around presumably in futile search for a parking spot, another group of tourists making their way towards the nearby Washington monument. (6) It towers in the corner of Hannibal’s second-story window, watching over the comfortably populous neighborhood – busy and active but not too crowded, and always imbued with a distinct sense of elegance. Next door, across Hannibal’s garden, he can see the Friedmans’ live-in maid in the kitchen, likely setting the table for dinner.

He shuts the curtains but leaves the lamplight on, turning his swivel chair around to give a silhouette that suggests his presence in the study. Plenty of eyewitnesses outside. He tugs on a black sweater over his shirt, a leather jacket on top of that for added warmth. Later, he will put on a seamed cap to
obscure his hair color. His shoes are specifically chosen for their even weight distribution, excellent traction, comfort, and a very common tread pattern forensics would be hard-pressed to identify.

On his way downstairs, he takes a black backpack, an army knife, a scalpel, and a coil of thin wire. He checks to make sure the doors are locked, the garage is secure, the windows are all shut. Only then does he descend into the basement, half a garage and half a wine cellar, with a false door leading into a hidden stairwell. Beneath the basement is his workspace and a triple-locked door that leads out into the city’s sewers.

From here, it is a very familiar path; his feet are as silent as death in the near-total darkness. He holds a small glowlight in his palm, no larger than a pebble and emitting just enough light to make sure he doesn’t fall into the murky water beside him. Discovering the sewers was part of why he bought this particular house – a convenient method of slipping in and out unseen. He had memorised them long ago; they are not as extensive as some of the older European cities, but they still afford him dozens of exit points to pick from. Affectionately, he thinks of the catacombs in Paris.

Fifteen minutes later, he emerges through a manhole in a small parking lot. It is a dark corner between three buildings, almost central downtown, easy to slip out of the shadows as if he had just cut through a back alley and emerged to find his car. Soon, a black Mazda (7) pulls out of the lot and hops on a freeway to speed out of downtown, east and then north towards Rosedale, Maryland.

It will be quick tonight, a kill for his larders and not for the express purpose of illustrating a point. Though it has been a while since the last piece, the Ripper does not stir in him yet, and Hannibal knows better than to go against his instinct. Besides, this particular waste of breath was rude, but not egregiously enough to warrant art and certainly not in any special circumstance that he would want to honor or remember. Just another pig to slaughter.

He parks in a secluded sideway and walks five minutes to a spot where he knows his quarry will jog past in about – he checks his wristwatch – ten minutes. He strings the wire at knee-height between a nearby tree and a fire hydrant, hides behind the shadowed treeline, and waits.

A lesson to learn, he thinks, as he remembers the rude young man who had kept him waiting and spilled soup on his suit jacket without apologizing some months ago, never run outside at night with earbuds on in a park along a route far away from other houses and open spaces. Unless you’re lucky, no one will hear you scream.

Despite having at least fifteen years on the young man, it is laughably easy for Hannibal to seize him. The boy trips and falls with a startled yelp. Hannibal swoops in from his hiding spot, grabs the boy’s neck from behind, and snaps it. He retrieves the wire first, coiling it, bagging it in plastic, and tucking it into his jacket. Then, he checks for a pulse – still alive, but effectively paralyzed, a complete injury at C5. (8)

The boy is well built, athletic, packed with lean, well-oxygenated muscles – Hannibal can already see how prime the cuts will be. He retrieves a black body bag from his backpack and rolls the boy into it with care. The boy is watching him with wide, terrified eyes, unable to vocalize beyond gasps and groans with the acute injury to the cricoid. Hannibal makes eye contact, smiles, and starts patting him down. A phone, an iPod and earbuds, a small cardholder with an ID and a credit card, a keyring. He tucks them all into the backpack except the phone, which goes into his jacket pocket.

With a grunt of effort, he heaves the dead weight over his shoulder, much like a bale of hay, and starts the quick trek back to the car. His eyes scan the perimeter, ensuring that there is no one else around. But the area is wooded and secluded, the nearest houses more than a block away and with windows facing away from the park. It would be too far to see him in this darkness anyhow.
Before he drives away, Hannibal disassembles the boy’s phone, taking out the SD and SIM cards, keeping the pieces at hand. Only when he is pulling away from the neighborhood does he have a moment to savor the panic in the boy’s eyes when he had zipped the body bag all the way. It gives Hannibal inordinate pleasure – he keeps it, that short moment of power, heady like a shot of fine scotch warming him from inside out.

It has been a good while since he last performed for an audience.

Just as he pulls into the freeway, his phone rings – that particular lilting melody he has set for Will since their last conversation. He smiles.

“Good evening, dear.”

“Hannibal,” she sighs – a tone of relief, perhaps? She doesn’t even argue the term of endearment, doesn’t argue about first names and titles. Hannibal adjusts the wireless earpiece, perhaps unnecessary precautions but prudent nonetheless.

“You sound exhausted.”

Will chuckles. “You should see how I look.”

“Still captivating, I’m sure.”

“Flatterer,” she accuses. “Are you busy?”

“No, just driving,” he says, and because she pauses, he adds, “I have my hands free, don’t worry. Technology can be very helpful these days.” Hannibal settles into the middle lane and pulls his window down briefly to toss the SD and SIM cards. Behind him are a pair of large freight trucks, running slow and heavy.

“I wasn’t going to scold you,” Will chuckles, “at least you use wireless. I forget.”

“Now, that isn’t very safe,” Hannibal scolds instead. “You don’t want to be one of my organ donor cases, do you?” Will laughs, a tired one but still warm. Over her laughter, he rolls the window down again, and this time tosses the phone itself. He hears his own wheels crunch over it just as he shuts the window. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your voice tonight?”

“A dead woman,” Will answers. Hannibal has to smile and choke back his laughter.

“Shit,” she mutters, “I’m sorry. It’s been a long day, I –” some rustling, the sound of a door shutting, “Why am I even making excuses? You know what I do. Anyway, I just wanted to call and ask, um, when you wanted to do that dinner.”

The laughter is threatening to burst out of his chest; his tone is suffused with its warmth when he says, “Perhaps this weekend, if you are free. A Friday or Saturday afternoon, whichever suits you best. All I need is a few hours’ warning if you cannot make it.”

“Okay, um, well, Saturday would be good, I think, I should conclude my case by then.”

“Such confidence,” Hannibal remarks. “It mustn’t be a very challenging case. And yet you sound rather shaken.”

“Not by the case itself – only by what it means.” Hannibal waits for her to continue, sensing there is
more. “I am finding that my superior disagrees with my judgment more and more. It makes me wonder why I do for him what I do.”

“It gives you a sense of purpose, and a place to belong,” he tells her. “Did you not tell me that you are good for what you do?”

“I also told you that it isn’t good for me.”

“Is that the case tonight?” Hannibal pulls out of the freeway and into a feeding road, headed for the bright lights of downtown Baltimore.

Will sighs. “Yes.”

“Then I am sorry to hear it. The only comfort I can offer is to tell you that I do understand – there are times when the emotional burnout of seeing death and disease on a daily basis wears on me too. We are only human, after all.”

Will makes a soft sound of agreement even as Hannibal’s boy in the back makes a faint groan of denial. The boy, unlike Will, has seen the shadow of something transcending humanity in the depths of Hannibal’s eyes.

Hannibal smiles, turning into the same downtown parking lot – now deserted, and the streets too. “So tomorrow, when I am at work suffering the various follies of humanity, I will comfort myself with the thought of our dinner. Are there any food allergies or preferences I need to be aware of, Will?”

“No,” Will chuckles softly, “no, you’re – I’m not picky. I can eat anything. Should I – do you need me to bring anything?”

“Just your wit and your humor,” Hannibal assures her.

“It may be ill humor,” she warns him, “since I will have just come from work.”

“But it’s still your humor, and that is enough.” He parked and killed the engine, looking around and making sure there are no observers. “I want you to know that I am very glad you called. I look forward to Saturday.”

“Yeah,” Will says, voice small and hesitant as Hannibal steps out of the car. She sounds almost as if she can’t believe herself. “Yeah, me too.”

The thought of having Will for dinner warms him enough that he forgets the cold and the physical labor of hauling the boy through the sewers. Hannibal prepares his equipment and looks over his victim. Yes, he thinks, this will do.

Yuriko wanders into his office the next morning with a bleary greeting and a handful of gossip. “The nurses are talking, sensei,” she informs Hannibal, airily and sounding detached. Hannibal hands her a mug and motions towards his brewed pot. She pours herself a generous helping and gulps it down with greed born of long shifts. “Oh, yes. Coffee. God. Mmmh.”

“The nurses always talk,” Hannibal corrects her while reviewing orders she had put in under his
name for the patients overnight. “How is the bypass patient looking this morning?”

“Coasting along just fine. I think you made some of our cardiothoracic surgeons very jealous. Can’t blame them, it was a damn fine job. He’s still in CVI – cardiology is looking at transferring tomorrow or maybe even later tonight if his pressures keep steady as they wean off the dobutamine. ABGs look fine, he’s still intubated but waking up so maybe extubating today.” (9) She takes off her white labcoat and takes a seat on the recliner by the window. “One of the nurses remembers that you’ve had similar accusations a few years ago and they turned out to be quite false. She says you’re too smart to date anyone in the hospital, much less within your own profession, and never your own student.”

Hannibal keeps his eyes trained on his computer screen for a moment. “...and?”

Yuriko whines, “Oh, come on, sensei, you gotta give me something!”

The corner of Hannibal’s mouth lifts. “I am indeed too cautious to date anyone who works within the same institution. I think we can both agree on that. I fail to see, however, how this is of any concern to you.”

Yuriko sticks her nose in the air. “My integrity as an honorable woman is being questioned so it definitely is my concern. And besides, I wanted to know if it’s true that you never date.”

He puts his mouth to his coffee to hide a small smile. “A worthy companion is very difficult to find; it has been a while since the last one.”

The child curled up on his recliner, cheeky little thing, stages a long gasp and adopts a moue of disbelief. “Sensei, dame desu yo,” she chastises, “you can’t let the years go to waste! They say it only gets harder. The struggle is real.”

“How, pray tell, do you speak so well of this struggle if you yourself are so romantically disinclined?”

“Manga,” (10) she quips, tipping her mug to finish its contents and then getting up to pour some more. “Very educational, you know. Teaches me how to human. So I was asking my roommate for advice on how to deal with this mess, and she pretty much told me to retaliate against Benjy.”

“I thought your roommate was an exceedingly bright young woman.”

“She’s also exceedingly vengeful. Either I do it, or she does it. Is there nothing we can do?”

“There is nothing for us to do,” Hannibal assures her, “apart from what we are already doing.”

“And that is?”

“Ensuring that the work we do is spotless. Everything else is subjective and frankly superficial. They can only base accusations that will ring true and yield disciplinary action upon unsafe, incompetent patient care.”

“Obviously they’re never going to find that with you.”

“Obviously,” Hannibal answers in confidence. “The patient is coping well, as I had expected. Benjamin was within his place to raise his concerns; I was within my place to dismiss and replace him. If questioned, I can justify myself by saying that I was only removing him from an uncomfortable situation that he neither cared for nor are equipped to handle.”
“Stab at his competence and his unwillingness to be proactive. *Nice.*” Yuriko pauses. “But wait, what about the protocol breach? They’ll go after you for that too!”

“I was operating with intent to mitigate the critical situation; the other paths of action I could have taken would have led to substandard results and a longer hospital stay, if not fatality outright.” Hannibal sweeps his papers up in a neat small pile and tucks the ones he will need over the day into a pocket. Time to start the day. He stands and logs out of the computer, leaving his desk in pristine order. Yuriko’s eyes are drooping shut as she watches him. “Sleep, Reizei-kun. Let me handle these issues. Worry about your practice instead, what you are learning and what else you need to work on. I will talk to you later this afternoon.”

“Right,” she mumbles, turning on her side and tucking a pillow under her head. “Sleep. *Arigato, sensei.*”

She slips under in less than a minute, a fine example of an overworked resident – or, in Will’s words: a well-trained, expert minion. He loads his pockets with the various instruments he will need over the day and leaves his office with a smile. The door closes behind him with a soft click.

*Having started his day with Will is a boon of fortune. Hannibal is leading the emergency team today, removing him from having to work directly with the questionable resident. He spends a majority of the morning shuffling the other emergency doctors into designations and offering his diagnostic insight where it is warranted. No level one traumas roll through their doors, no mishaps with the staff. Such a rarity should be celebrated, but not a word from any mouth – physicians to paramedics – in the communal superstitious belief that talking about it would ruin their good luck.*

Around lunchtime, Hannibal gathers his papers and passes report to Dr. Jean-Christophe Theoret, a fellow senior physician qualified enough to take his place. The Frenchman is short, balding, blue-eyed, and one of the few doctors Hannibal truthfully enjoys working with – Jean-Christophe has one of the most discerning palates among Hannibal’s friends.

“Aren’t you off to lecture again, or is it a boring committee meeting this time?” Jean-Christophe asks him as they exchange papers.

“Lecture,” Hannibal says, checking his wristwatch – 12:14. Enough time for a quick lunch before he has to catch the shuttle to the medical school. “Dr. Yoon’s class; we are covering advanced trauma life support.”

“Just remember that our job is to fix and not inflict trauma,” Christophe grins, “because the younglings always stagger away from your lectures looking so overwhelmed.”

The elderly ER nurse supervisor, who happens to be standing nearby, cackles in delight. “It’s the face, Dr. Theoret. He’s far too handsome, and still a bachelor – what a tragedy.” She pats Hannibal’s arm in her usual motherly manner, which he indulges with a smile. She has been practicing as a nurse in emergency since Hannibal’s internship and has always treated everyone with her signature blend of kindness and firm discipline that Hannibal has to respect. He can trust her to run the staff well, so he refrains from putting her card in his Rolodex when she starts fussing at him like so: “How many times have I told you, young man? You need to find yourself a good woman. Time’s a’wastin’!”
Jean-Christophe laughs, along with a few other nurses nearby who would never dare to address Hannibal in such a manner.

“A good companion, as I was telling Yuriko, is hard to find,” Hannibal pointedly says. “And even harder to keep.”

“Obviously you’re not looking in the right place,” she snorts. “Off with you, then – will we see you tonight?”

“I will be back on staff at four until ten. I trust you will all keep everyone alive and well?”

A few nurses shrug. Jean-Christophe smiles, “Alive, we’ll try – but well is a tall order around here.”

Hannibal shakes his head and decides to walk away before the discussion gets more involved. Yuriko is fast asleep when he quietly enters his office to change out of the white labcoat back into his suit. He eats his modest lunch: fresh pear and fig salad paired with diced chicken breast tossed in pesto, mozzarella, and sliced sugar snap peas, all served cold to avoid having to suffer the hospital’s microwave. At 12:35, he tidies his desk to leave and catch the 12:40 shuttle taking him to the Krieger Institute. He stands at the shuttle stop mentally reviewing his lecture points when he hears his name and turns.

“Hannibal!”

“Michael,” Hannibal nods, canting his body towards his erstwhile superior in a show of deference. “A good day, I see.”

“Meetings, meetings, more meetings,” Michael Albertson sighs, fixing his coat that has his name & title embroidered on the chest. Their perceived rivalry – not that Hannibal ever considered him a rival – is much less apparent these days, with Michael having calmed down after being promoted to directorship. Hannibal is quite certain the man isn’t aware that he only got the promotion because Hannibal had adamantly turned it down. “Where are you headed?”

“Lecture.”

“Ah,” Michael fiddles with his phone with a frown. “How fortunate. I’m stuck listening to administrators all day, blabbering about things they don’t understand.”

“Is it still our patient satisfaction issue? We have shown them that our nursing turnover is near nonexistent,” Hannibal points out. “It’s not the staff we are having problems with.”

“Yes, yes, and the administrators don’t listen. All that matters to them are the numbers from the survey scores. This entire ‘novel’ idea of reimbursement based on patient satisfaction – I tell you, if the patients already know how to treat their own diseases, why do we spend so many years in med school and residency? They seem to think it’s a customer service issue, but the patient rarely ever knows best, if at all. Their stupidity is what brings them to us in the first place.” (11)

This is part of the reason Hannibal refused the directorship. He has no patience for such ludicrous arguments; furthermore, it would be detrimental to the institution, since he would more than likely want to filet the administrators within less than a year.

“Is there progress being made on hiring administrators that have adequate medical background, instead of hiring marketers with business degrees?” (12) Hannibal asks as they step onto the shuttle. “Even doctorate nurse practitioners with adequate experience would be better than a businessman.”

Michael sighs, sinking into the faux leather seats. “Well, we’re trying. There are a few candidates,
but no openings until Achatz leaves, and that’s not until January.” They sit in silence for a moment, Hannibal basking in the white sunlight streaming through the windows, until Michael speaks again. “Speaking of January – Susan and I will be attending the premiere for the Met Opera’s Faust in DC. Are you coming?”

Numerous faculty from across the hospital would be attending, including Susan and Michael Albertson. January is three months from now. A peer review committee would take about two months to process a complaint. His first dinner with Will is in four days.

Hannibal inhales and considers.

“I might just,” he says, “provided I don’t get sacked for the complaint being filed against me.”

Michael blinks. “About what?”

“The cardiac bypass patient – ah, I guess you haven’t been updated yet, if you weren’t here on Monday,” Hannibal feigns surprise.

“No, I was in Washington – what happened?”

“Patient came in with gunshot wounds, penetrating abdominal trauma, but was also having an acute MI that required a bypass, so I did it while he was in the theater after we had stemmed his bleeding and repaired the wounds. I imagine there will be a complaint coming from somewhere. I have been told that there are quite a few cardiologists talking about me.”

“Oh,” Michael blinks. “Well, did the patient survive?”

“Doing quite well in CVI, according to my resident.”

“Then I don’t see the problem,” Michael shrugs. “It was an emergency situation. Bottom line, you were within your means to save the patient’s life. Besides,” he snorts, “the ER staff would be rebel against me if you were sacked.”

Hannibal graces that remark with a short chuckle. They step off the shuttle and into the bright sunlight, parting ways at the Institute’s lobby. He bids Michael a good day and heads towards the lecture hall on the fourth floor, resting at ease with the knowledge that his superior will give him full support once again. Michael sees it as a favor Hannibal owes, but just as Michael had implied, it is Hannibal who holds the power, the influence, in their department. Michael, as short-sighted as he is and blinded by his own greed, knows no better; it is Michael’s wife, Susan, with whom Hannibal must be careful.

But it has been more than twenty years. Hannibal has played his game with them long enough that he has conquered the entire board they all move within. He now has a new opponent, with new variables and new goals. These gentle, delicate steps are his opening moves.

Hannibal makes it to the lecture hall with fifteen minutes to spare. He stands in the hallway by a window and makes a call while the class slowly assembles under Dr. Yoon’s watchful eye. The receptionist comes on the line after two brief rings.

“Yes, good afternoon. This is Dr. Hannibal Lecter making a reservation for Faust, please. Premiere night, for two.” Looking over the city from the window, Hannibal runs a finger over his lips, unable to hold an anticipatory smile. “The second guest is Ms. Willow Graham.”
REFERENCES

(1) What Hannibal is performing is called **coronary artery bypass grafting** (or **CABG**, pronounced "cabbage", in the medical alphabet soup) and it is a procedure usually done by thoracic surgeons after careful deliberation of the patient’s medical history, imaging, and labwork. It is most emphatically **not** done by trauma surgeons (which is what Hannibal is, in this fic) because it is usually urgent but not **that** urgent, and can wait a few hours with medical management until the appropriate cardiothoracic specialists can be called in for the case. In short, Hannibal made a major protocol breach. – During the conventional “on-pump” procedure, cannulae are usually sutured into the major vessels to redirect blood flow as the heart is bypassed using a machine. To do this, the team delivers cardioplegia (stops the heart completely) with a cold potassium mixture, allowing the surgeon to safely stitch the grafted healthy vessels to “bypass” the diseased/blocked vessels feeding into the heart. What Hannibal is doing is an “**off-pump**” or “**on-beat**” procedure: performing the surgery with a beating, active heart. Better for the patient overall, but much, much harder to do. In case you couldn’t tell, this is just Hannibal showing off, smug shit that he is.

(2) Hospital hierarchy can be very complicated and flat-out fucking confusing, even for people who work in the system. (I do, and I still get confused. I shudder to imagine being a non-medically savvy patient.) Generally, for most systems, the medical ladder looks like this from top to bottom:
- **attending / faculty physician** (Hannibal),
- **fellows**, **residents** (Yuriko and Benjy),
- **nurse practitioners (NPs)** / **physician assistants (PAs)** / **other midlevels**, and then **medical students**. The term “intern” is being phased out at most teaching institutions; in our hospital, they are called **PGY1 (post-graduate year 1)** or **first-year residents**.

(3) **CK-MB** (creatinine kinase, muscle-brain combinant) and troponin are cardiac markers used to assist in diagnosing acute myocardial infarctions (MIs). MIs are colloquially known as heart attacks. The heart’s ejection fraction (EF) is the fraction of outbound blood pumped from the heart with each beat; people experiencing MIs usually suffer very low EFs, which produce most of the symptoms, most commonly **syncope** (passing out). A “**T-wave upright in V1**” refers to an abnormal tracing of a heartbeat in a 12-lead electrocardiogram (ECG); it should be inverted, not upright, in the V1 view. The findings Hannibal mentions are all indicative of an MI in this poor patient.

(4) **Japanese names**, like most East Asian names, are usually arranged with the family name first and the given name last. Hannibal is referring to his pet resident’s name properly by calling her **Reizei Yuriko**, instead of the Western-style Yuriko Reizei. Additionally, referring to her as **Reizei-kun** is typical of a senior addressing a junior colleague, the ‘-kun’ honorific denoting her lower position in the mentor-student relationship. This is also why she uses the titular ‘**sensei**’ when addressing Hannibal.

(5) **An MVA** is a motor vehicle accident. Another one from the medical alphabet soup.

(6) I have placed Hannibal’s house in Baltimore’s Mount Vernon neighborhood, an incredibly expensive and well-placed residential area in the heart of the city, ten minutes away from Johns Hopkins by car. Below are helpful images (all of which are kept on Pinterest as well). (Right-click on images and 'View Image' to see full-size.)
(7) The Mazda CX-5 is Hannibal's chosen utility vehicle (aka the Kill Car), primarily because it's generic, cheap, common, and has large cargo space for multiple human bodies.

(8) A complete spinal injury at C5 renders most people quadriplegic (paralyzed from the shoulders down). They are usually numb or have disturbed sensation, though they are still capable of maintaining their airway without the help of a ventilator. This means they can breathe and oxygenate, which keeps Hannibal's meat nice and fresh until he is ready to harvest in his workspace. Rigor mortis sets in quickly and sours the meat, after all. (This speaks of great arrogance - or confidence - in Hannibal's part, because if his prey is somehow found, they are still conscious and would be able to identify him to the authorities. Such hubris, Hannibal.)

(9) CVI is short for CVICU - cardiovascular intensive care unit. They usually handle the post-CABG patients. Dobutamine is an inotropic drug used very commonly in cardiogenic shock and acute heart failure to temporarily increase cardiac contractility. It's considered a support drug until the heart can begin functioning adequately on its own (or not; we take it off if family decides to withdraw life support). ABGs stand for arterial blood gases and are the golden standard for measuring tissue oxygenation and pH levels in the bloodstream; a good reading from the ABG means the heart is pumping enough blood to supply oxygen to the peripheries. Extubation (removal of the breathing tube) usually doesn't happen until the patient begins waking up & initiating spontaneous breathing.

(10) Manga (Japanese comics) has taught me invaluable lessons in life, okay! Like how picking a fight with people makes them your bestest friend ever, even though they might not know it yet! Or, like, how you always pay respects at a temple and never break spider webs. Or, like - okay, I'll stop now.

(11) This is true. Medicaid & Medicare are now capable of withholding reimbursement to
hospitals based on patient satisfaction scores measured by the HCAHPS survey, which, by the way, is a very flawed and entirely inefficient waste of time. As a result, doctors are under pressure to please patients instead of treating them; customers, after all, always know best. Fucking depressing, really.

(12) Believe it or not, a large number of hospital administrators are actually MBAs and not MDs - meaning they have business degrees, not medical ones. Of course, directors and research coordinators are still MDs and PhDs, but MBAs are becoming more common degrees for board members to have. Not to deny that their expertise is necessary when it comes to legal, financial, or public affairs, but when they control a large part of operational functionality and funding in the hospital, it creates a gap between the medical priorities and the administrative (monetary) goals.

(13) (Addendum @ 2015.07.23) Last but certainly not the least, our reference for Reizei Yuriko is the actress Devon Aoki, as pictured below.
Cassandra

Chapter Summary

Jack doubts Will where he shouldn't. Will tries not to resent him and has dinner with Hannibal instead.

Chapter Notes

Remember! There is a Pinterest page and also some music. Also, 8tracks is driving me bonkers. I am considering just putting the tracks on a MediaFire folder and giving you guys the link. How does that sound? Do any of you even listen to the tracks? How about I just keep a running tracklist at the end of every chapter, with links to YouTube or a download if I can't find it anywhere online? Hmm.

Sometimes Will dreams in white noise. Heels clacking on the marble tiles of a church. A soda can popping open. A twig crunching underneath bare feet. Marbles rolling on a wooden floor. Wood popping and crackling as it burns. The dogs’ claws scrabbling at her door.

And then the pauses in between. The silence is always deeper in the winter, when snow mutes everything in shades of white. Dead leaves and branches crunching, cracking underfoot. The beast moves beside her and behind her, its breath the fullest sound, its warmth a presence with a life of its own. Sunlight glimmers faintly from above, but the sun is beyond the canopy and beyond Will’s capacity for concern.

The trees are quiet when Will turns around, although she knows that they watch. She sees eyes from within their dark canopies, glowing bright and yellow, peering at her in the half-light. But they are quiet when she turns around.

Before her, the beast stops and rears proud, head held high and chest thrust out. A stag, its body clothed in raven’s feathers, dark as tar and glistening rich; its eyes are intelligent and warm and strange all at once. Its antlers, as she gazes upon them, branch out into a sprawling crown, parting the canopy, parting the clouds, parting the very sky to scrape at the starless void above. It pierces a single hole into the atmosphere through which a warm rain falls, and when Will blinks to wipe a droplet from her eye, her hands come away with blood.

She wakes.

She wakes shivering, teeth chattering, sweat crystallizing as ice on her bare skin. Sleepwalking again. The world is a blur around her: no glasses, but she has her socks on at least, and her pajamas. She holds herself and rubs at her arms with stiff fingers, a futile effort: her shirt is thin and wet, and she has nothing underneath.
Will takes a step and a dry branch crackles under her heel – she realizes that she is deep in the wood. Water trickles somewhere nearby. Must be close to the river. Her breath clouds above her face when she looks up at the sky, winter blue so pale it is almost white. The trees around her reach up and curve their branches overhead, like dark fingers caging her in and away from the light. Terror sluices across her gut, a white-hot twisting cramp, deep and gripping. She forces herself to move, to stumble, somewhere, anywhere – to find her way out, *I have to find my way out. Is there a way out?*

The dead brush underfoot are trodden in places, so she follows her own footsteps back towards the house. What seems like hours pass as she plods carefully through the frost. But halfway down the path she somehow took in her sleep, Winston and Georgie rush at her with frantic barks. They clamor at her feet, making her stumble more than once. When she gets to the house, she finds that they have somehow managed to paw the doorknob open. How long it took them to do so, she doesn’t want to think about.

Inside, she stumbles through the kitchen and into the living room to hunch in front of the space heater, stripping off her clothes and wrapping herself in a warm quilt. Her gut is still cramping – deep, churning, in time with the wild shivers that rack her body from head to toe. The dogs don’t care that she sits naked and shaking: they pile on her and nuzzle, as if to assure themselves that their master is still whole.

“W-Well,” she tells them, “I’m still h-here.”

She gathers Buster in her arms and closes her eyes. She breathes. Somewhere in the house, her phone rings.

Will ignores the first call, physically unable to remove herself from the warmth. She ignores the second call as the warmth lulls her into an almost narcotic lethargy. But on the third call, Winston pads in from the kitchen with her phone in his mouth.

“R-Really, Winston? You want me t-to leave you that b-badly?”

Winston drops the phone in front of her on the floor.

“F-Fine.” Will picks up the phone and with her still trembling fingers wipes dog drool from the edges. Jack, of course. Who else does she talk to on the phone but Jack? Will navigates through the call history and reads *Hannibal Lecter.* Right. They had talked last night.

Heat floods her cheeks. Will clears her throat and dials Jack.

“Will,” he answers on the first ring, “I need you here now. We have another body.”

All thoughts and excuses fly out of Will’s mind. She removes Buster from her lap and rises, quilt falling from her naked body to pool on the floor. The cold air is painful against her sensitive skin, but she pays it no mind.

“I’ll be right there.”

She hangs up and takes the stairs two at a time, making a beeline for the bathroom to wash her face and feet. She puts on the next set of clean clothes she can find, layers them for as much warmth as she can manage. She shoves her feet into a new pair of socks and pulls on her work boots.

That they have found another body implies that the Angelmaker has escalated – exactly what they had anticipated. But Will doubts that it will be the same as the last.

She barely registers locking the doors and leaving the house. The dogs get their goodbyes, but she
isn’t sure how she managed to drive the distance without veering off the road: her mind is slipping at the edges, wavering between coherence and a melange of strange sights.

At Quantico, Jack stands in wait beside one of the armored FBI SUVs. He sees her and gets in, expecting that she will follow, noticing nothing about the way Will’s eyes must be glazed in a state of mild confusion. Beverly is with them; she doesn’t notice either, busy rapidly typing on a computer.

“Hey, girl. So we found our suspect – a search match from a national cancer database – Brian worked some wonders on this thing – let’s see... Elliot Budish, 35-year-old truck driver, diagnosed with a brain tumor five months ago. I called the wife listed on his medical records, she says she left him shortly after the diagnosis and took her two kids with her. Asked her a bunch of questions –”

“She left him?” Jack clarifies, as they pull into the freeway.

“She left him,” Beverly repeats, “because she said he wanted to be alone. Even though she took a leave from her job to be with him. Apparently, he was the one pulling away. It was hard on the kids to see him like that so the wife just took them and left.”

“Was he abusive to the children?”

“No, she denied that. I asked specifically. I also asked if he was experiencing any conflicts of faith – but get this, he was never a religious guy!”

“So why angels.” Will doesn’t bother to phrase it as a question. Who can decipher the madness of a dying brain?

“Well,” Beverly smirks, “I may just have the answer to that too. Wife says he had a near-death experience as a child, almost died in a fire, but he survived. The fireman said he must’ve had a guardian angel.”

Will huffs, incredulous. The detail is so negligible – a random fireman’s words, so many years ago – it makes only tangential sense, so removed from the focus of their investigation. If the wife hadn’t felt particularly chatty, they would have missed it. Will relaxes against the backrest and closes her eyes, resigning herself to the inevitability of coincidence.

“Where did this fire happen?”

“Ummm, where he grew up, I think? It was a farm…”

“And where are we going?” Will asks.

Beverly pauses. “A farm.”

Will smiles, but without mirth. “This will be the last one.”

Budish hangs from the rafters, suspended in an elevation of form. Momentary and transient, like motes of dust suspended in a stray beam of sunlight. Chance. Circumstance. The edges of his ragged flesh are lined a vivid dark red. Will stares. “He took the choice.”

“Choice?” Jack repeats.
“Not God’s choice, not man’s choice, not even fate – but his choice. The only choice has.” The edges of Will’s vision wavers; she can hear the slow, heavy breathing of a beast unseen behind her. But she’s awake. She’s here, in a farm, with the Angelmaker and Jack. Her gut wrenches; she decides to be honest. “I don’t know how much longer I can be of use to you, Jack.”

Jack turns and stares. “Really?” he says, incredulous, “Because you caught three. The last three we had, all of them, you caught. In less than a week. That is pretty damn useful to me, Graham.”

“Not this one,” Will says, voice low. “This one surrendered. This is no catch.”

Perhaps Jack senses something – or perhaps he has known all along but only now chooses to see. He peers at her with a frown and says, “My wife doesn’t talk to me much, I’m used to that. But I don’t want to have to get used to you not talking to me too.” He leaves the question hanging between them.

Will sighs. Her vision is swimming, her skin is tingling. She feels unmoored. “It’s getting harder and harder to make myself look.”

“Well, no one’s telling you to look alone.”

Is that Jack’s way of telling her to find a friend? Bring them into her mess? Is Jack hinting at Alana? Will grits her teeth. “But I am looking alone, Jack, and you know what looking at this does. You know and that’s why you put me with Alana.” She pauses to gather her thoughts before they scatter. Try as hard as she might, they still slip through her fingers like fine sand – but she tries. She has always tried. “I can make myself look, but the thinking is shutting down.”

“What is it about this one?”

“It isn’t this one,” Will says, and she finds herself being blisteringly honest about her state of mind for the first time in a long time. Pretending to be well isn’t working anymore, and if she can’t bring herself to tell Alana, then maybe she can tell Jack. “It’s all of them. It’s the next one, it’s the one that I know is coming after that.”

But in the end, Jack is still Jack. He frowns. Pushes. “You want to go back to your lecture hall? Read about all of this on Tattlecrime? Is that what you want?”

Will fights not to make a sound of distress. Her forehead crumples. Cold sweat beads along her hairline, on her palms, on the back of her neck. “No,” she says, shaking her head, hunching her shoulders. “No, I don’t, you know I don’t. But it may no longer be an issue of what I want. It may be what I have to do. This is bad for me.”

Jack sighs explosively. “I am not your father, Will. I’m not gonna tell you what you ought to do.”

Will snorts. “Seems like you will anyway.”

“You go back to your classroom,” Jack says, almost spiteful and certainly forced, “and when there are killings you could have prevented, it will sour your classroom forever.”

A surge of hot anger slashes across Will’s chest. “And then maybe I’ll go find a job as a boatyard mechanic somewhere.”

“You wanna quit?”

Jack is goading her, baiting her, and he’s not even pretending otherwise.
“Quit,” she echoes softly, almost a whisper. Quitting is an art, Will thinks, where one has to decide what to keep within the frame and what to keep out. This has been her life for how many years now, she doesn’t know what it would look like to start over. She has invested so much of herself in this career. If she quits… if she quits, where else can she go? What else can she do?

Jack leaves, passing her by somewhere in between one disordered thought and another. Grass rustles outside, the wind carrying whispers from another place. Perhaps from inside her head. She blinks, and suddenly, Budish is there.

I see what you are, he says, though his mouth doesn’t move. His voice comes from everywhere all at once, surrounding her, filling her from within. It sets her teeth vibrating, her bones shuddering – she can feel her ribcage rattle as she inhales. She is pinned frozen underneath his cold, dead eyes – the shorn flesh from his back expands above and beyond, grotesque wings in full glory. I see what you are.

“W-What do you see?” Will asks, afraid. Eager. “What do you see inside?”

I can bring it out of you, he says. Light begins to burn from behind him, blinding Will, bringing tears to her eyes. With the terrible timbre of truth, he proclaims, I can give you the majesty of true becoming.

The light explodes.

Somehow, she staggers out of that barn and makes it home. Jack is deathly quiet on the way back to Quantico, affording Will no distraction from the clamor within her head. It isn’t the first time she has had visions, but it is the first one to be so vivid – and the first one while she is wide awake. She can still hear the voice, feel the shaking of her bones –

Apologies fall in staggered mumbles from her lips as she ducks away from scrutiny. She hopes against hope that Jack has noticed – no, hasn’t noticed – she doesn’t know anymore, she doesn’t care – all she wants is blissful silence, darkness, emptiness, she is so tired.

So tired, she stumbles into the house, collapses on the couch, curls into a ball. Her eyes are closed but her vision swims in death and light, wings and blood, white and red. So loud, it’s so loud, “Why is it so loud!”

Scuttling paws, snuffles. Whines. Ringing silence.

Will presses her face into the cushion, desperate, desolate. No one hears her scream.

Three and a half days later, it is a dreary Thursday morning when Will is called in. She has attended only to her lectures and avoided the BSU altogether, weary of Jack and wary of Alana. But Jack heeds no rules of propriety, no social mores, when in pursuit of his criminals. Make no mistake, Jack does care – but not that much.

When Jack sees her and greets her, it’s as if nothing had happened. They hadn’t had their
conversation in front of Budish. Will hadn’t had a near total meltdown. Everything is fine, obviously everything is more than fine, because otherwise, Jack wouldn’t so confidently bring her here.

“Always a little nervous walking into these places,” Will says quietly.

“Why is that?”

Her anxiety is making her talk, but she lets it. “Afraid they won’t let me out.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t leave you here,” is what Jack has to say, before quirking a lip and adding, “Not today, at least.”


But Jack keeps going up the steps, pulling the coat taut around his shoulders as he hunches to gear for war. That’s what it looks like. Will forces her feet to walk past the sign – *Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane* – even as she can hear the loud shriek of metal against metal behind her, gates swinging shut.

They are welcomed by dour-faced security guards with holstered batons and high-grade tasers. There are no windows and the walls are a dull grey, a stark contrast to the director’s office, decked in redwood and rich upholstery. The director himself – mid-priced suit, flashy wristwatch, expensive perfume – projects a pretentious air of grandeur and intellect so odious it makes Will gag in disgust.

“Ah, yes,” he smiles (if that is even an acceptable term for the expression he wears when looking upon Will), “Dr. Bloom just called me about you, Ms. Graham. Or should I call you Dr. Graham?”

“No a doctor,” Will responds directly, confronting the obvious effort at putting them on uneven ground.

“You’re not FBI either,” the director slyly notes.

“That’s a temporary ID,” Jack interrupts, having no patience for games. “Ms. Graham teaches at the Academy.”

“A teacher,” the director nods. “Well, please. Take a seat.”

“Thank you,” Jack says, and sits down, but Will does not. Instead, she walks to the nearby window – one of the very few she has seen since entering the institution – and looks out. Her arms are crossed and her hands gripping her elbows tight. Jack continues. “Dr. Chilton, we’re going to need to see the crime scene while it’s still relatively undisturbed.”

“I assure you, for something so disturbing, it is quite undisturbed.”

Will shakes her head at the attempt of wit. *Pathetic.* “Why was a nurse left alone with a prisoner in a high-security psychiatric hospital?” she asks, pointed and sharp.

Dr. Chilton turns to her. “For the two years since he was brought here, Gideon behaved perfectly and gave every appearance of cooperating with attempts at therapy. As dictated by our present medical administrator, security around him was slightly... relaxed. I cannot help but feel slightly responsible myself for what happened. He sat directly across from me and I had no idea what he was hiding. And now one of our staff is dead.”

“I understand, doctor,” Jack nods. “Ms. Graham’s going to need to see the crime scene with as much privacy as you can provide.”
“Oh, yes,” Chilton smiles again, raising the hairs on Will’s arms, “that thing you do. You’re quite the topic of conversation in our psychiatric circles, Ms. Graham.”

Will recalls Hannibal’s mild, tilted smile, the way his tongue had curled around those same words. He had only made Will feel warm and a little wary. Chilton engenders the opposite effect.

“Am I.”

“Yes, of course! A unique cocktail of personality disorders and neuroses, all working together to make you a highly skilled and incredibly valuable profiler.”

“She’s not here to be analyzed,” Jack bristles, as he always does when he perceives intrusion into what he deems as his territory.

Chilton shrugs. “Perhaps she should be. We are woefully short of material on your sort of thing, Ms. Graham. Would you mind speaking to some of the staff?”

“Doctor,” Jack frowns.

“No, no, no, of course not on this trip,” Chilton assures, hands fluttering to placate Jack. “Maybe a special visit.”

Will grinds her teeth in hot, quiet rage. “Thank you, Dr. Chilton; I’d like to see the crime scene now.”

Chilton tilts his head and smiles at her again, but leads the way. Passing through security, Will’s rage commutes with her anxiety and settles at the base of her throat with the weight of a leaden ball, choking her, making it hard to breathe. Truthfully, she should derive some meaning out of how the ball of anxiety only dissolves away when she steps into the bloody stage of the crime, where the mutilated corpse is displayed on the floor.

Jack and Chilton are saying something behind her. She doesn’t hear them.

She inhales. Exhales. Closes her eyes. The pendulum swings.

Her lungs heave, full with the power she wields – the blood spattered on her face as warm as her father’s caress; she has gouged the woman’s eyes out and they weigh soft in her hands, easy to destroy, easy to take away. She watches the woman crawl on the floor, blind, in agony – she licks her lips, picks up the next sharpest object nearby. The muscles on her back pull with the object’s weight as she throws it, thrusts it, like a spear or a javelin, impaling the woman in a manner precise enough to communicate a point. There is a point to this, after all, it isn’t just meaningless bloodshed, though the woman doesn’t know that, does she, doesn’t care either, gasping as she is for air –

Will inhales air and relishes the ease with which she does it, in comparison to the woman on the floor, who will die soon, but for a purpose. To make a point.

Head spinning with euphoria, she picks up a blade.
“I heard you met Dr. Chilton.”

Will starts, blinks out of a waking dream. Licks her lips. She can still feel the weight of the pole as she thrust it into the dead woman’s flesh.

“I did.” Will clears her throat. “It was very unpleasant.”

Alana chuckles, lips quirking at the bare discontent in Will’s voice. “That is generally the consensus, yes. He can be overbearing, sometimes. Making up for some perceived inadequacies, I think. Though I can’t blame him, if he revolves within certain circles.”

Alana pauses, as if to contemplate the prudency of saying whatever it is at the tip of her tongue. Will tilts her head in silence, begging continuation.

“Dr. Chilton is trying to emulate someone else. A common human fault.” Alana sighs, patting her skirt down, a seemingly apologetic motion. “How goes the case?”

“It’s concluded, by my judgment, but Jack disagrees.”

“Disagrees how?”

Will grimaces. “He thinks there’s a chance that Gideon is the Ripper.”

“You don’t think so.”

“Gideon is too unrefined to be the Ripper.”

“Is that so?” Alana writes something down on her notepad, then spins her pen in a thoughtless habit. “You think of the Ripper as a refined person?”

“Entity,” Will corrects, “the Ripper is a refined entity. Person has too many definitions ascribed to it to qualify for a term. And the Ripper is too intelligent to get caught and put behind bars. Not to mention the logistic impossibility of committing such intricate murders while behind bars – Jack is grasping at straws. He’s getting desperate. I don’t know why. We behave as if we have no time left, while the Ripper murders in a manner that tells me he has all the time in the world; haste won’t help us catch him. Haste will only help him escape us, time and time again.”

Alana is quiet for a moment, always a harbinger of painful things. True enough, after a pause, she says, “Perhaps Jack is getting desperate because he feels you slipping away. He told me that he offered you a chance to quit when you verbalized your discomfort with the cases last week. What made you feel the need to quit, Will?”

Will takes off her glasses, pinches the bridge of her nose, screws her eyes shut. Hot rage curls in the back of her mouth, tasting of tar and smoke. How dare Jack –

“It frustrates me,” Will grits out, “when Jack questions my judgment, Alana. Especially when he so emphatically pulled me into active duty as his lead profiler. He doesn’t agree with my assessments so he refutes them. But when I’m at these crime scenes, I don’t exactly feel charitable or patient, because the killers usually don’t feel charitable or patient. I can’t put up with him then, when’s overbearing and acting like shit. We’ve argued many times. This was one of the worse ones.”

“So you don’t actually want to quit,” Alana clarifies.
“No,” Will laughs mirthlessly, “I don’t actually want to quit. But sometimes it seems like what I want matters very little in the way of the world.”

“What do you want, Will?”

*What do I want? Will’s mouth aches to say them. I want many things. I want comfort. I want silence. I want the world to listen when I speak, because I hear the voices clearly when they speak to me. I want to communicate.*

That’s a good one. “I want to communicate,” Will says. *To communicate all the things choked up in my chest.* For a moment, Will tilts on the edge of confession: she almost tells Alana all of it, everything, the nightmares, the sleepwalking, the darkness, the shadows bending in the wood, the waking phantoms, the terror, the comfort of the beast –

“Isn’t that what we’re doing, Will?” Alana says. “You’re communicating with me just fine.”

The moment shatters in Will’s chest. Everything, all of it, recedes back into her lungs, settling in the likeness of a large beast retreating into its shelter for the coming winter.

“I don’t know, Alana.” Will sags back into her chair, closing her eyes and tipping her head back. “I don’t know anymore.”

On her way home, Will thinks of Hannibal. The woods flash by her window, bare and leafless, broken branches sticking up into the sky. The moon is at its zenith when she makes it home, her dogs restless at the door when she welcomes them. Without another thought, she pulls her phone out and dials the only other name on her call list. A smile pulls at her lips when she hears his voice.

“Hannibal.”

“You sound exhausted,” he speaks into her ear, as she lets the dogs out to romp in front of the house.

“You should see how I look.” *Like death warmed over.*

“Still captivating, I’m sure.”

“Flatterer,” Will accuses him. “Are you busy?”

Will doesn’t want to disturb him at work, doesn’t want to rob him of precious sleep, but thinks of these things far too late, when she already has the phone to her ear and his voice in her head. She closes her eyes and holds herself. The dogs are barking at something in the distance.

“No, just driving,” he says, and Will can hear it in the background. They carry on more small talk – *communicating,* Alana would call it – until he asks, “To what do I owe the pleasure of your voice tonight?”

“A dead woman,” Will answers. Pauses. And then, “Shit, I’m sorry, it’s been a long day, I – ” she retreats back into the house, letting the screen door shut softly behind her, and then resting against the wall. “Why am I even making excuses? You what I do.” Will inhales, convinces herself to push through it, to say what she wants to say. To communicate. “Anyway. I just wanted to call and ask, um, when you wanted to do that dinner.”

And just like that, Will confirms her own perhaps meager but still earnest commitment at
communication, at an attempt of friendship. The warmth in his voice is reward enough, though it is quiet and reserved. Will imagines it is reserved just for them. Suddenly, the thought of sleeping tonight doesn’t sound so intimidating.

“I want you to know that I am very glad you called,” Hannibal tells her. “I look forward to Saturday.”

“Yeah,” Will smiles. “Yeah, me too.”

5:07am. Jack is calling again.

Will swipes at the phone and brings it to her ear. “Yes, Jack.”

“Will. We need you in. Now.”

“Sure, Jack,” she grunts, turning over and jostling Winston. Jack hangs up without a goodbye, but something about his voice is wrong. Will gets up from her bed shaking the sensation of the stag’s warm fur underneath her hands.

She flexes her fingers as she brushes her teeth, combs her hair, gets into decent clothing and gets into her car. No breakfast, just coffee. The drive is mercifully quick this early in the morning, with only light traffic and her driving in the opposite direction. When she gets to Quantico, Beverly is in the middle of defending herself to Jack.

“I’ve hooked into every carrier database and telephone provider in the US, Jack. Nothing!” she throws her arms out.

“Look again.” Jack, immovable as always.

“I did my agains. And my again and again and agains. I can’t find any electronic trace of any call made to your home at 2:46am.”

Will slows her steps as she approaches them, watching Jack warily. She keeps her arms crossed, her jacket drawn around her shoulders.

“I am telling you that the phone rang,” Jack says slowly, firmly.

“Wake your wife up?” Zeller asks.

“I was alone,” Jack grits teeth. Will draws a fair bit of satisfaction over this, even though she knows she shouldn’t. How does it feel to have your judgment questioned, Jack?

“Whoever made that call could have made it from that little box outside your house, or, or, like, a junction in your neighborhood or something. Either way, there would be no trace signal to track. You sure it was Miriam Lass?”

Will jolts at the name, head turning to look at Beverly. She isn’t looking at Jack, instead eyes trained on her laptop, fingers flying over the keyboard. Will finds herself wondering exactly how many skill are in Beverly’s skillset.

“It was Miriam,” Jack confirms with a certainty born of desperation.
“You haven’t heard her voice in two years, Jack,” Zeller reminds him, ungentle.

“You gonna continue to question me on this, Z?” Jack turns, baring teeth, the superior predator in the room and he knows it. “If so, maybe I should ask you to leave the room while it’s still safe for you to be here.”

No one breathes a word.

Jack inhales and starts over. “The Chesapeake Ripper recorded Miriam Lass as he was killing her, two years ago. Last night, he called my house at 2:46am. He played that recording for me.”

Will sees a chance and seizes it, seizes Jack’s own words to drive her point home. “And now we know that the Chesapeake Ripper is not Dr. Gideon,” she says. “The call couldn’t have been made from the BSHCI. A call from there Beverly would be able to trace. Are you certain it was a recording?”

Jack gives Will an incredulous look. Will softens her tone.

“Jack, you said yourself there was no body.”

“Miriam Lass,” Jack heaves, “is dead!”

Will hisses out a breath of frustration, but refuses to back down. “The Ripper is making it very clear that someone else is plagiarizing his work, Jack! Why do you refuse to see this! It was 2:46 in the morning, you’re in a deep sleep, you’re roused, you’re disoriented. You might not even know if you’re still asleep. You–”

“I know when I’m awake!” Jack bellows.

Will steps back. Silence rings between them. Will’s face is a picture of confusion and frustration – but for once, Jack mirrors her.

“Well,” Will says, “that’s good for you. If at least all of us were so fortunate.”

Shaking her head, Will leaves the room.

Will hears of Jack’s harebrained scheme from Beverly the following day, after her second class concludes. Apparently, the team had spent the entirety of yesterday chasing after dead ends, until Jack came up with an idea that all of them universally recoiled from.

“Girl, he’s batshit insane if he thinks that Lounds woman will cooperate,” Beverly rails, tearing viciously into the panini they bought together from the Academy’s cafeteria. They are sitting in her empty classroom, Will in her chair and Beverly on the desk with her legs kicking back and forth like a child. “I mean, I understand he wants to get to the bottom of it – Miriam is like his one shiny red button and the Ripper sure knows how to push it – but fuck. Freddie Lounds? Really?”

“Jack is desperate,” Will repeats, in the same tone she had used with Alana. “I suppose I should start setting up subs for my classes.”

Beverly stops chewing and asks, “What? Why? You’re not quitting, are you?”
“No, but taunting the Ripper will likely end up with more dead bodies which lead to dead ends.”

“Oh,” Beverly breathes, eyes getting comically wide, “shit.”

“Yeah,” Will sighs. “I know. And I think Jack knows too, he’s just denying it. That’s what makes it sad. But I don’t know how to communicate it to him in a way that would make him stop and listen. He’s not listening to me right now. He’s doubting my judgment, and it negates my purpose in the team.”

“Girl, don’t say that!” Beverly puts down her sandwich and leans forward on one arm, looming above Will. “We have got no fucking clue what we’re doing out there without your profiles. We need your help. Okay?”

Will smiles at her indulgently.

“I’m serious! Fuck what Jack thinks. Eventually, everything will point the way you predicted anyway. He doesn’t see what you see. He’s just frustrated right now. Desperate. Don’t listen to him.”

Laughing softly, Will takes off her glasses and rubs at her face. She still has two more classes to teach in the afternoon, and then tests to grade when she gets home. She really has no time to play clean up after what will become Jack’s mess – because she knows, she can see that this will be a mess.

But she appreciates Beverly, she does. So she tells her. “Thanks, Beverly.”

“Don’t mention it,” Beverly snorts, resuming her angry consumption of the panini and kicking her legs against the desk with resounding thuds. “We girls have to stick together in this mess. Besides, it’s only humane of me to give you a warning if I know you’ll be subjected to Freddie fucking Lounds in the near future.” Will gives her a questioning look. “Well, you know Jack’s gonna want you there.”

Will groans. “God. It’ll be terrible.”

Beverly laughs. “It’ll be a fucking disaster.”

It is a disaster. Jack calls her in the very next day and Will ends up trading barbs with Freddie Lounds from the get-go.

“You have all the qualities of a good reporter,” Jack tells Freddie as an introduction, “intelligence, guts, a good eye… so how is it that you ended up where you ended up?”

“In criminal justice journalism?” Freddie clarifies sweetly.

“Criminal justice journalism,” Will snorts, “being a euphemism for tasteless tabloid reporting, in this case.” Will has her arms crossed and is wearing her most obstinate behavior as a pointed protest against Jack’s scheme. Freddie, on the other hand, sits across from her in self-satisfied triumph.

Jack quells Will with a look and cuts in before Freddie can throw a retort back. “You ran an unconfirmed story about the Ripper. What I want is for you to confirm it.”
Will exchanges a look with Alana, who is also present and wearing a candid frown. Both of them disapprove. Both of them go unheeded.

“An exclusive story like this would be a coup,” Freddie remarks, eyes wide in delight.

“Mm, yes, it would,” Jack agrees. “And you would get the satisfaction of seeing the LA Times, the sanctified Washington Post, and even the holy New York Times run copyrighted material under your byline, with a picture credit. What’s against you, and by association us, is that your brand of journalism is obnoxious and therefore disliked.”

Well. Jack certainly doesn’t mince his words.

“Yes,” Freddie still agrees, folding her hands before her. “That is an obstacle.” Will gives it to her; she is at least honest. “ Tried to get an interview with Dr. Gideon. I was denied. Evidently some trouble with my euphemism.” Her green eyes flick sharply at Will. Will narrows her own eyes back.

“I’m friendly with the new chief of staff,” Jack assures her. “I can get you a one-on-one.”

Freddie shifts in her seat, even more eager, smiling now. “Not to snap bubblegum and crackwise, but what’s my angle? Is this the Ripper, or do you just want me to tell everyone that it is?”

“Jack thinks Gideon could be him,” Will cuts in, eyes meeting Freddie head on. “And as you well know, certain personalities are attracted to certain professions. Do you know what professions psychopaths disproportionately gravitate to, Ms. Lounds?”

“CEOs, lawyers, the clergy…” Freddie rattles off.

“Number five on the list is surgeons,” Will tells her.

“I know the list,” Freddie says.

“Well, then, you know what number six is.” Will’s smile is in the shape of a gleaming knife. “Journalists.”

Freddie leans forward. “Know what number seven is, Ms. Graham? Law enforcement.” And when Freddie smiles back, hers is just as sharp. Foxlike. “Here we are, a bunch of psychopaths helping each other out. One big madhouse. Isn’t it just grand?”

Alana sighs from beside Will. “I want it on the record that I think this is a very bad idea, Jack.”

“It’s useless, Alana,” Will says, standing up and gathering her bag. “I already talked to him but he won’t listen to a word we say. Just leave it.”

“Will,” Alana protests – but Will is already halfway to the door. Jack says nothing to stop her. This is the second time she’s walking out on him. Perhaps she should consider quitting after all.

“With you or without you, we’re doing this, Graham,” is all he says.

“I know, Jack.” She holds the door open before her for a moment. But just a moment. “Good luck.”

If one operates on the principle that everything can be a learning experience, then of course living on
needn't be so painful. That’s what literature tells Will anyway. From the age of twenty on, she did her best to live according to that philosophy. But as a result, she was cheated and left misunderstood, her gift used and abused, her affections wasted, time and time again. Will knows she should be grateful – for the multitude of strange and often painful experiences. All sorts of people she has seen, with all sorts of stories, loves and hurts, ambitions, dreams, lives and deaths.

But they all leave, never to return, as if she were no more than a bridge they were crossing on their way somewhere, anywhere. Will keeps her lips sealed tight, carrying their legacies with her, within her, even now. She could think of them as her bridges too, ones she burns behind her, with only the smoke-tears in her eyes to remind her that they were even there.

She spends Friday at home, curled around a dog and with a book of poetry in her hands, contemplating the wan light that filters through her slightly grimy windows as the words wash over her. She could check on how Jack’s plan is going. She could go online and read TattleCrime. Surely Freddie has seen Gideon by now. Surely she’s written something and published it for all the world to peruse.

She could, but she doesn’t. There is no call. The house is quiet the entire day.

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Early Saturday morning, her phone rings. Will knows what about before Jack even says a word. Without argument, she gathers herself into warm clothes and drives out to the location, where Beverly meets her with a breathless greeting.

"Last call to Jack’s cell from a disposable phone was traced here..." Beverly looks around, "...or within 100 feet of here."

Will nods. "What was Miriam Lass looking into before she went missing?"

"Medical records," Beverly sighs, "because if the Ripper was a surgeon, she thought he might have treated one of his victims in the past."

Will has a hard time thinking that the Ripper would be so careless, but then the Ripper that Will knows is the Ripper after Miriam Lass' disappearance. This killer is certainly capable of learning a lesson. "Have they retraced her steps?"

Beverly shrugs. "The ones they could find, yeah. But she wasn't exactly talkative, and she made a jump somewhere that they couldn't explain or follow." Will gets a look. "You make those jumps."

Will shakes her head. "The evidence has to be there. I'm not psychic." Will doesn't say that she's quite sure whatever Lass saw, she would be able to see too. But only if she were looking at the same tableau, and only if the Ripper hasn't since then cleaned up after his own tracks.

"Every surgeon that came into contact with any of the Ripper victims have been thoroughly vetted or currently under observation."

"Including Dr. Gideon?"

Jack is upon them all of a sudden, seething with frustrated rage. "Dr. Gideon wasn't in my bedroom, the Chesapeake Ripper was! Calling me at dead hours of the night, making me listen to Lass beg for help -- I won't stand for it anymore."
Good for you, Jack. If only the rest of us had the luxury of demanding such things from the world. But Will is careful to keep her face straight, watching as a team swarms into the building where the tracer is coming from. It's a lure, that's all; the Ripper is playing fisherman and Jack is an overeager fish, a big one, hungry for any little morsel of truth. But Jack, of all people, should know that truth is never absolute.

Will has no chance to tell him so. SWAT trickles out of the building slowly, the captain wearing a grim face and heading straight for Jack. Of course, Will thinks, of course the Ripper kept her and milked her for all she was worth. And what is she worth?

Jack.

Jack bellows a curse to the skies, as if to reject the very nature of the world, throwing his hands to the air and clutching his head. Will and Beverly stand there, having heard the report from the captain, having no desire to see it for themselves. Miriam's severed arm, laying on a table with a phone clutched in the stiff fingers.

Will doesn't say I told you so.

It doesn't take very long to conclude their business in Quantico. There's not much they can pull from the severed arm; the Ripper has not eluded captivity for this long by being careless. Jack is a subdued, ominous silence, the kind that cannot be displaced even with the most cheerful of noises. Everyone else in the crew has worked with Jack long enough to leave him be; Will only knows to do so because she takes a glimpse at him and sees the crushing guilt.

It takes her the better part of her hour-and-thirty-minute drive to Baltimore to shake the overpowering sense of inadequacy, the burn of failure, the bitter taste of having to swallow one's own arrogance when things don't go the way one hoped it would. Looking at Jack had hurt. But what can she do? What else could she have done? She had warned Jack, hadn't she. She had told them all.

I-95 is mercifully slack on a Saturday noon. Will finds herself rolling into Baltimore proper with plenty of time to spare, so she refuels at a gas station and pulls out her phone to look up some nearby shops. Guest etiquette dictates her to bring a gift in respect of the effort the host has made... but she has no clue what to get him. After all, she barely knows him.

There are small boutiques nearby, much to her luck. According to her GPS, she is maybe five to ten minutes away from his neighborhood, which allows her extra time to deliberate and look around. She walks from shop to shop, ambling slow and thoughtful, sometimes not entirely paying attention to what she is looking at. Her mind keeps straying to Miriam Lass' voice, that recording on the phone, the few words that have been Jack's torment this past week. Will wonders who Miriam found, if she did find someone. Because people like Miriam Lass don't simply disappear. People as driven as her fight tooth and nail to their very last breath.

Perhaps that's what she did, Will thinks, perhaps that's why the Ripper respected her enough to keep parts of her.

That, or the Ripper is a consummate strategist, knowing when and what to use which piece for.

As she walks, Will's mental construction of the Ripper fractures and solidifies and fractures again, morphing into something new as she assimilates information. The Ripper is perhaps one of America's
most prolific serial killers; moreover he's brutally, violently unique – some of her colleagues would even call him the very best of all of them, the reigning King of the entire blasted horde. Will is among the few who are privileged to have access to the compiled data from all of his confirmed and suspected kills. At Jack's behest, when she first hired into the FBI, she was given time to dedicate focused effort to those cases, the Ripper becoming her only responsibility when she is not required at the field. The Ripper is a puzzle. Will's most difficult puzzle. Walking into his crime scenes is like walking into a mirror house, where all the walls only reflect Will back at herself, except distorted, in the same manner that he distorts a violent massacre into something of beauty.

"Miss? Can I help you find anything today?"

Will startles out of her reverie. "Oh, um. I'm sorry, I was – I was far away, wasn't I."

The shopkeeper – a young, fresh-faced thing – smiles at her indulgently. "That's alright, miss. I get that way too around this time of the year, what with exams and all."

_Right, Will reminds herself, finals season. I still have tests to grade._

Determinedly, she steers herself away from the work waiting at home. She's here for a specific purpose, and that is – oh. The gift. "Um. Right, so. I'm looking for..." Will realizes that she has walked into an upscale chocolatier. Is chocolate even appropriate? "...for, um, something to give a friend who's having me over for dinner tonight. Something small and nice."

_Vague as fuck, Willow Graham._

"Well," the shopkeeper hedges, "I'm assuming they like chocolate – " and that's already more than Will can assume, " – so anything in the shop would be a great gift item – but that's not being very helpful, is it? Here, this one's one of my favorite products..." Will follows the shopkeeper to a sampling stand. "We call this chocolate salami. Miss Karen – our pastry chef – takes whole medjoul dates and dried figs, grinds them up and mixes them with marzipan and Valrhona cocoa nibs and 72% French dark chocolate. Then she rolls them in confectioner's sugar and packs them like rolls of salami. It goes very well with cheeses, meats, and wine!"

She's never seen or heard of chocolate so fancy in her life. Shocked at how curious she feels, Will takes the offered bite. A rich, fruity, savory-sweet flavor explodes on her tongue – her face slackens in surprise, to which the shopkeeper responds with a bright smile. Will walks out of the shop with four chocolate salami rolls, two for herself and two for Hannibal. The shopkeeper is kind enough to give her a small brown gift bag stuffed with red gift tissues to put the chocolate in.

She checks the time and drives the remaining distance to Hannibal's place. Hannibal Lecter, as it turns out, lives in the very heart of Baltimore – a rich, culturally steeped, old neighborhood where sophisticated-looking people stroll down cobbled streets under the soft glow of gas lamps and the eaves of century-old red-brick buildings. Following her GPS, she goes around the Washington Monument and rolls down a quaint one-way street lined with cars and cobbled sidewalks. There is a small park with large trees and a fountain on one side, a row of old red-brick townhouses on the other. Will counts them down until she comes to a stop in front of the right one.

"Really."

There is an empty spot parallel to the curb across the street from the house. It's a tight fit with her SUV, but she makes it. Will gapes up at the house when she steps out of her car. Suddenly, she feels self-conscious. She smooths both hands down her thighs. She has her knee-high work boots and a pair of dark jeans, a warm knit blouse underneath her brown leather jacket and a voluminous scarf. Too casual, too... she is definitely under-dressed for this. _But I'm already here!_
The townhouse appears well-appointed even from the outside. She crosses the street slowly – barely any traffic at four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon – is she too early? It looks like the townhouse bearing Hannibal's address is adjoined as one residence to the unit immediately next to it. A large abode for one man. There are four stories to the unit on the left but only one story with what looks like a rooftop balcony to the unit on the right. Will spies a jet black Bentley Continental GT parked on the door-front spot marked as Reserved and has to shake her head.

She feels eyes on her when she rings the doorbell. Will resists the urge to fidget and is suddenly acutely conscious that she is still armed, her Sig P226 Tactical resting strapped and holstered to her side. She has half a mind to turn around and leave the gun in her car when the door opens to reveal a smartly dressed Hannibal Lecter.

"Will," he greets, warm and with an eye-crinkling smile. "Good afternoon. I'm glad you could come."

"Hi," Will greets back, momentarily blindsided. She has forgotten, in the few days that she hasn't seen him, how encompassing his charm can be. "Um, good afternoon. I hope I'm not too early."

"Certainly not," Hannibal ushers her inside, where the air is richer and warmer, lulling Will already towards a state of open engagement and relaxation. "I am still preparing dinner, but you are welcome to the kitchen for some aperitifs, perhaps a glass of wine if you have no pressing engagements later tonight or tomorrow."

"No, nothing," Will lies about the stacks of paperwork waiting at her desk at home. "We concluded our case today."

Hannibal turns to her briefly with a smile. "Are we celebrating, then?"

Will surrenders her jacket and scarf to the coat stand. "I'm not sure."

It is a testament to Hannibal's astute comprehension when all he makes is a soft sound of assent. Furthermore, Hannibal doesn't so much as blink at the gun she reveals when she takes off her jacket. Fumbling between unstrapping the firearm and handing Hannibal the chocolates, she trips on the edge of a rug and catches herself – or, rather, Hannibal catches her by the arm.

"Careful now," he says, righting her. "The rug here can be tricky."

"Right," Will blushes, clears her throat. "Sorry, um. I got you some – a little something, it's – just, um, for having me over tonight." She sticks the gift bag out towards him, looking everywhere but his face. He takes the small item with the same warm smile.

"You needn't have, but I appreciate the sentiment." He peeks inside. "Ah, chocolates. Perhaps to enjoy with the cheeses and – I do believe I promised you a glass of wine, Will. This way."

Will breathes when he turns away. She takes a moment to collect herself as she follows him through the house. That's what it is: an entrance hall. It opens into a spacious and richly appointed living area, one created for entertaining and – dare she say it – impressing guests. She removes her gun as they go along. They pass the dining room, where a long dining table is set quite intimately, it seems, for two. When they arrive at the kitchen – obviously a well-kept and well-used room, with large windows overlooking an enclosed garden and an odd red armchair set in a corner by a windowsill – the aroma knocks Will wide blinking awake.

"Whatever that is," she blurts, "smells heavenly delicious and I can't wait to eat it."

Hannibal laughs, softly but in a manner very entertained. He doesn't proceed to the stovetop where
something glorious is simmering; instead, he makes for the counter, where a wine bottle in an ice bucket sits beside two empty wineglasses. He pours for them both and says, "I would tell you what it is, but I don't want to ruin the surprise. Do feel free to sit or stand, and you can put your firearm down wherever you would like."

Will places her gun with the strap on the red armchair, but chooses to lean against the counter instead, from where she can sip wine and watch him as he prepares food. Salad greens, it looks like, and pears to be sliced on a chopping board. "Can I help you with anything?"

"You may certainly help me finish this fine bottle of red tonight, as it is intended to be consumed within a finite time after the bottle is uncorked," his tone brooks no argument, though his stance remains playful, engaged, and open. "To go with the wine, I have a plate of Bûcheron and Brie and Crottin – fit for a glass of Beaujolais – and, let us see here – ah, dark chocolate. Excellent." With graceful skill and speed, he unwraps the chocolate salami, cuts them into straight thin slices, and plates them alongside the cheeses. He takes one and offers Will the rest.

Will takes a cheese – whichever one it is, whatever its fancy French name – and looks up to see that he is watching her. "Is there something on my face?"

Hannibal smiles. "Not as such. I'm simply delighted to have you here, that is all."

Heat crawls up her neck, but she manages to keep her wits about her. "Your neighbor certainly doesn't share the same opinion." A quirk of a brow. "The house with the white door. Someone was peeking through the curtains when I rang your doorbell. I think you're stirring the neighborhood housewife gossip, doctor."

Hannibal chuckles softly. "That would be the Friedman's live-in maid. An aggressively attentive young lady. I do believe she immigrated from Serbia. She likes to watch the goings on and gives meticulous reports to her mistress, Dr. Friedman, who was kind enough to hire and house her."

Will makes a soft sound of amusement as she reaches for a slice of the chocolate. "Are all the residents here doctors or something?"

"The Friedmans are both professors at the Peabody Institute," Hannibal confesses, moving behind the island counter to resume his dinner preparations, "but the Colsons next door are a political family. Across the street, though I do not know their exact academic accomplishments, there live Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi – a pleasant young couple, both very intelligent, and constantly travelling. The husband works as a professional photojournalist, and the wife is a published writer who likes to go with him wherever he goes. I must invite them over for dinner the next time I chance upon them."

"And then there's you," Will muses, adjusting sideways to lean her elbows on the counter. She tips her wineglass side to side and watches the red of the wine lap at her fingers through the glass. "Dr. Hannibal Lecter. You must be quite popular hereabouts."

"This is my city," he says, "I live here and work but ten minutes away." Of course; the Johns Hopkins hospital. "I am fortunate enough to have acquired these two units many years ago; I worked hard at earning for them. They were quite expensive, even back then. The elderly couple who used to live here were both gratified to see it pass on to someone who would appreciate its beauty and history. They were afraid the city would ask to tear it down, or, heavens forbid, commercialize it."

"It's a gorgeous house," Will remarks, looking around her once again. "I was thinking how large it is for one person."
The very moment the words leave her mouth, Will kicks herself. What presumption!

"Sorry, that was rude, wasn't it."

"Quite alright," Hannibal is still smiling. "It can be overlarge for one person, at times. But on those nights, I am fortunate to have friends who will come and dine with me."

"No affairs or engagements otherwise, then?"

"My, Will," he remarks, eyebrow quirking, "we are certainly forward today."

Will blushed, scowls. "Can't blame me for making certain. You weren't exactly subtle about your intentions."

"I had thought I was being vague enough."

"Vague is not subtle," Will declares, "and you, Hannibal Lecter, are not capable of subtle."

He pauses. "You don't think me capable of subtlety? I'm wounded."

"Seeing is believing. I haven't seen you be subtle yet."

Hannibal laughs. His laughter is quiet, somewhat thoughtful, and warm; it feels as if the very sound is made and reserved just for her. For her ears only. Will warms at the audacious thought. He moves to the stovetop, stirring something delicious, and says after a while, "No affairs, no engagements. My job makes it difficult to find a good match."

"Don't doctors usually marry doctors? You understand each other better."

"I won't deny that there were certain... possibilities in the past," Hannibal responds, still facing away from Will. She watches his shoulderblades shift underneath his powder-blue dress shirt. "But not all possibilities become realities. As my uncle used to say, I am a difficult one to find a fit for." He turns around and moves to the counter to prepare plates for their food. "What about you, Willow Graham? No affairs, no engagements?"

The tone with which he asks her reminds Will rather sharply of old Mrs. Bradley, who still lives in Louisiana. The last time she had visited, which was shortly after she received her graduate degree, Mrs. Bradley had asked her the very same question. No man in your life yet, young lady? Not even an affair? Will had blushed and laughed and brushed the question aside. But coming from Hannibal, it sounds serious, like they are setting a precedent. Like laying foundations.

So Will gives him the same answer she gave Mrs. Bradley years ago. "Sometimes it can be hard to find the right anchor," Will says, "with enough weight and strength to hold down a drifting vessel overfull with baggage."

Hannibal meets her eyes and smiles, but this time it is small and a little bit sad. "My sentiments exactly."

They rest in silence for a while.
"Our first course," Hannibal presents, "is a simple salad with crispy smoked quail, pears, cashews, and cherry molasses dressing."

They are seated in the dining room now, candles and all, Hannibal at the head of the table and Will to his right. The seats are almost (but not quite) embarrassingly close. Will blinks at the dish before her and snorts. "Hannibal, this isn't simple."

"Semantics," Hannibal dismisses. "Every term is relative to something else. In this case, the simplicity of this dish is relative to our main course."

"Oh," Will eloquently responds. (The wine must be stronger than what she is used to. Either that, or Hannibal's thrice-damned charm.) With Hannibal's encouraging gaze she cuts into the crispy quail, spears a piece of it with some greens and a slice of pear. The warm-and-cold, crispy-and-soft, savory-and-sweet flavors mingle in her mouth; she makes a soft sound of delight.

Gratified, Hannibal begins working on his own food. Unlike other people who have prepared food for Will, Hannibal appears to enjoy every bit of his own dish, even though he is the same one who spent hours to prepare it. Alana, for example, had no patience eating whatever she herself prepared.

Will clears her throat and forces bitter, unsavory thoughts from her mind. Turning to her friend (they're friends, right?), she says, "This is – I have no words for this. What did you even put in this?"

Hannibal smiles serenely at her. "The hopes and happiness of my unfortunate victims, dressed with the lifeblood of their dreams."

Will splutters with surprised laughter. "Hannibal!"

"You asked," Hannibal shrugs.

Will leans an elbow on the table, shoulders shaking with laughter. She covers her face with a hand. "That should not be funny."

"Humor, like anything else, is made of semantics."

"Relative?"

"Very relative," Hannibal confirms, "which is our saving grace as medical professionals. Humor, as black as our brand is, saves us from slitting our own wrists what with everything that we see and have to do everyday."

Will resumes eating as she regains her calm. "Somehow, you don't strike me as the type of doctor who cracks black jokes at the nurse's station when a patient is on their way to the afterlife."

"No, but my favorite resident is."

Will stages a gasp. "Playing favorites! Why, Dr. Lecter, I never."

Defensively, Hannibal justifies himself. "Every bit of my favor is hard-earned, Agent Graham. My resident has worked hard and exemplifies the highest level of competence within her scope of practice."

Amused, Will remarks, "She must be very accomplished to garner your praise like that. I don't exactly see you as a lenient taskmaster."

"I am not," Hannibal's lips twist in what must be a smirk. Will marvels at the playful, coy expression.
"Neither are you, I think."

"I like to say that I'm only as hard on my students as my boss is on me."

"And how is that going for you?"

Will rolls a shoulder, biting into her last piece of quail and letting the rich taste erase the bitterness rising in the back of her throat at the thought of Jack. "Not very well right now."

Again, Hannibal reads her too well. As if sensing the turmoil within her, he stands and retrieves their empty plates to take them to the kitchen. It gives her space to think, to consider – how much should I tell him? More than that, how much can I tell him?

Because Will is never comfortable breathing life to her doubts, her demons. Will has long since learned that keeping them boxed in is better for everyone. People will either think her weak or damaged beyond use – and what then? People walk away.

Will is surprised at how vehemently she feels about Hannibal walking away. This is stupid, she thinks to herself, sagging against the chair. They don't even know what this is, if this is anything at all. Is there even anything to walk away from? And then, unbidden and quiet, a voice from deep within her whispers: there is me.

When Hannibal walks back into the room, that heavenly aroma assaults Will wide awake again. She has fingers on her lips, but she takes them away and folds both hands in her lap, attentive as Hannibal slides the elaborate plate in front of her with much relish. He enjoys this immensely, she realizes.

"Our main course: rabbit roulade, stuffed with Belgian pork sausage," he announces, "potato parsnip purée, Swiss chard, and hard cider sauce."

"Rabbit," Will echoes. "Well. That's, um, unusual."

Hannibal affects an easy shrug and slides into his own seat. "Have you never had rabbit before?"

"I can't say I have. It smells divine, though." Will curiously looks over the meat, finding it hard to differentiate from chicken or turkey. The meat is white and appears quite fine. Her stomach churns, but not in disgust or trepidation at all; no, it churns from hunger. "Should I be feeling sorry for the poor thing? Because all I am right now is hungry."

Chuckling, Hannibal ushers her to begin and smiles. "Perhaps I should have warned you that nothing here is vegetarian."

Will snorts, slicing into the meat. She can see fine curls of steam rise from her plate, ferrying with it the richest, most glorious aroma of impending satisfaction. "No need. I guess the poor rabbit should have hopped faster."

That surprises Hannibal into genuine laughter. The soft sound brings a smile to Will's face even as she takes her first taste of the rabbit. Her eyes fall shut; she almost drops her knife. The flavor! And the texture, oh, Will knows she has never had anything quite so good. She takes another cut of meat, and then another, a good stretch of time in greedy silence before she realizes that Hannibal has paused and is watching her over his wineglass with a smile.

Will stops.
"No, do go on, please. Don't let me interrupt," Hannibal says, tone soft and without mocking. Will is trying to control her blush. "Forgive me if I have made you uncomfortable. Sometimes, I will have colleagues and old friends for a formal dinner, cook for them and entertain them – but it isn't often that I get to watch someone enjoy the food I have prepared quite like you do." When Will doesn't say anything (what can she say?), he continues, "Perhaps my colleagues, so inured as they are to the high life and fine dining, have a certain level of expectation when they come to dine with me. I rarely, if ever, see them genuinely savor what I have made like you just have."

He picks up his own cutlery and resumes eating. Will remains quiet, unsure of what to say, a little embarrassed too. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and follows his lead, returning her attention to the food.

After some silence, Will clears her throat. "Do these dinner parties happen often?"

"More seldom these days, given how busy I've been since taking on professorship. My schedule does not allow for as much flexibility as it used to when all I had to worry about were my hours on service at the hospital."

"Are you enjoying it? Professorship?"

"Quite. There is something deeply gratifying about watching bright minds flourish with one's own guidance," Hannibal says. "How about yourself? You teach as well, no?"

"There are days that I love it and days that I don't," Will answers, finding the truth spilling from her lips with very little effort. "I teach forensic psychology – expressly constructed, unorthodox courses for future agents on some of the worst criminals known to mankind. It can get overwhelming when I have to become very intimate with the details of each case. And then, of course, there are the students."

Will shakes her head; Hannibal chuckles. "Are they a handful?"

"It's Quantico," she sighs. "Students come into the Academy with preconceptions about what they will face in the real world. They walk into my classroom with all this fluff in their heads, especially about the popular cases, the ones that have made it big in the media. But they can't even begin to understand what it's like, looking death in the face. Death looks back into you."

Hannibal, far from being off-put by the grim turn their conversation has taken, instead makes a soft sound in the back of his throat and asks, "Do you like Nietzsche, Will?"

"Nietzsche and I exist in vehement dislike of one another."

"Really," he remarks. "How come?"

"The entire idea that man can become more than man," Will scoffs, "what a treacherous thing to believe. Man will always be man: fragile, fleeting, and full of flawed beliefs. Capable of great violence and cruelty as much as he can create beauty in all things. And we are all subject to the world around us. We all bleed red."

Hannibal hums, taking a moment to finish chewing, to sip at his wine. "You have a way with words, Will. I have a feeling I would enjoy your classes."

"Oh, no. Please at least warn me if you're going to sit in," Will sighs. "Allow me to mentally prepare. You are an intimidating person to be lecturing to."

"Not so," he denies, "I would behave."
"If you say so. You seem like the one student who has something smart to say about everything."

"It makes the class more memorable if there is active discussion." Hannibal reaches to pour her more wine. This is her second glass? Or third? "Term is ending soon, however, and that should mean a reprieve for you."

"Oh, I don't know," Will frowns, "It just means Jack will have me more. Classes are usually a good excuse to escape from him for a short while."

"Jack, I assume, is your superior?"

"Jack Crawford, head of the Behavioral Analysis Unit." It is then that Will realizes she never did tell Hannibal the exact extent of what she does. She has simply assumed his knowledge of it through Freddie Lounds' godforsaken TattleCrime blog. "I profile cases, typically homicides and the occasional missing persons case if it's connected with a homicide. Usually, I land the serial ones. Because the criminals have no respect of office hours, Jack likes to call me at odd hours of the day to the cases – the worst days are when he pulls me from my classes in the middle of the day. I don't think he realizes how hard it can be to switch gears."

"It certainly sounds as though he places a lot of trust in your judgment."

"Hah," Will barks, reclining in her chair. "That's funny."

"You don't think so?"

" Doesn't seem so. Right now all he does is question everything I say. He wants me to tell him only what he wants to hear. If whatever I think does not agree with his frame of mind, he will reject it – and his word is law."

"Perhaps, in his desperation to find an answer, he is seeking your expert opinion to validate himself," Hannibal suggests. "That in itself is a sign of huge trust." Will scans her eyes across his face, suddenly reminded that this man was a psychiatrist before he was a surgeon. And yet Will feels only minimally threatened, when usually she would be on the very tips of her toes; how strange.

"It certainly doesn't feel like it."

"No one likes it when we are questioned," Hannibal agrees. "It feels like a threat. It feels like they think we are lying to them."

"I'm not," Will insists, "I would never. I'm trying to make him see the truth."

It is then that a peculiar smile blooms upon Hannibal's face. The playful warmth in his eyes have morphed into something deeper and darker, but no less affectionate. Will knows she should take her eyes away soon, but she can't – she doesn't want to. Hannibal's fathomless eyes draw her in. Has she had three glasses of wine? Four?

The timbre of Hannibal's voice changes. "You are a beautiful Cassandra," he tells Will, "a herald seeing and speaking of the truth, but with no ears to listen, no one to heed you."

"Cassandra," Will thinks aloud, because the wine or the food or the warmth has loosened her tongue, "was cursed with the power of prophecy by Apollo, whom she spurned. Apollo, the patron god of Delphi, a prophet of the future. A god of healing and medicine."

There it is again, that eye-creaking smile.
"I only know one medical doctor," Will blinks. "Are you insinuating something, Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal laughs. He laughs a lot. At least, he does with Will. "I was hoping our story would be something far happier and more agreeable than spurned Apollo and tormented Cassandra."

Will could needle him about his intentions again. Will could try to convince him against this, could try to make him see what a phenomenally terrible idea it is to even try. But instead, she tilts her head and very seriously asks him, "Do you feel any degree of shame at all, likening yourself to a god of Greek mythology?"

Hannibal's laughter grows, a presence large enough that it blankets warmth over Will's shoulders. Her face has fallen into a soft smile. She curls against her chair to face him better and sips at her wine, eagerly waiting for whatever he will throw back at her, because she is enjoying herself, thoroughly and unreservedly, with another person. With this person. The stomach, after all, is not the only organ that hungers.

"Dearest Will," he smiles, "if it means being mythologized with you, I feel no shame. None at all."

REFERENCES

(1) Cassandra, also known as Alexandra, is the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, twin sister to Helenus of Troy. In the popular version of the Greek myth, she was given the gift of prophecy by Apollo, but when she refused his romantic advances, he cursed her so that no one would ever believe her words. In some versions, she had already consented to have sex with Apollo, but then broke her promise. Her cursed gift became a source of much frustration and pain; she was seen as a madwoman and a liar by her entire family and the Trojan people. Some renditions have her incarcerated within the citadel per her father King Priam's orders, and in these stories, she is driven truly insane by the isolation. Among Cassandra's many predictions was the fall of Troy. All of her prophecies were disbelieved with the exception of one: she foresaw who Paris was and proclaimed that he was her abandoned brother.

(2) This chapter's soundtrack: Winter Heather, Frozen Breath by Austici; Eyes Shut by Alice Sara Ott & Olafur Arnalds.

(3) Bentley Continental GT, Hannibal's city car.

(4) Chocolate salami from Dude, Sweet Chocolate. These are divine.
the doors of perception

Chapter Summary

Hannibal's flattery begins to achieve its goal. Will gets a new intern.

Chapter Notes

Hi, guys! I'm back! Apologies for the delay: amongst other things, I have finished med school, traveled Europe, and started my residency. It's been busy. But that hasn't stopped me before!

It's becoming more difficult to map out the future chapters; we officially deviate from canon at this point. Introducing more original characters and cases. Fun times! I look forward to writing another Hannibal chapter, but it's gonna have to be the one after next. Will goes on a field trip soon...

They have moved to the study, where the fire burns warm against the chill of the night and sheds an intimate glow on Hannibal's countenance. Will moves from shelf to shelf in order to avoid looking at him. Hugo, Dante, Montaigne, Aurelius: the books on the shelves tell her enough for tonight.

"Have you read all of them?" Will asks, running her fingers across gold-lettered leather spines.

"I have."

"They are well cared for."

"Some are antiques, first editions."

"Some are not in English."

"Many of them," Hannibal amends. He has not risen from his seat by the fire, preferring instead to watch Will walk around while he nurses his drink. "Some days it is still easier for me to read in French."

Will turns halfway, one hand still resting over a spine. The golden text scrolls in a foreign script. "I don't only see French."

"French is the language of my enlightenment. Certain things make more sense to me if written so. English, for me, will always be first and foremost a language of necessity."

"I used to speak French."

"Indeed?"

"A long time ago, brokenly, and certainly without the depth that you do," Will's hand leaves the books as she gravitates towards the warmth of the fire. Or perhaps it is the warmth of Hannibal's
"Eight. Nine, if you count my cursory Russian," Hannibal tilts his head and the fire makes his eyes glimmer, with some emotion Will does not yet want to name. He watches her intently as she braces herself against the armrest and sinks slowly into the chair directly across from him.

"Nothing about you is cursory," Will tells him, wry smile on her lips, curling into the soft give of the armchair. She has to wonder who else this chair cradled so warmly like it does her, who else has had the privilege of sitting with this singularly curious man. Jealousy is an acrid taste she has not endured on her tongue in a while. "It seems such a shame to speak so many languages and yet have so few to converse with."

Hannibal shifts his shoulder in the mildest shadow of a shrug. "My resident, she speaks three, perhaps four, out of the eight."

"Is that why you like her?" Will chuckles.

"Among other remarkable things, yes."

"You don't even deny your favoritism."

"Not if it is well-deserved. We all have people in our lives whom we prefer."

Will ducks her head to examine the drink in her hand. When did she pick it up from the side table? She can see the faint imprint of her lips upon the porcelain. She doesn't even remember how much she's drank. Irresponsible. She stands up and starts pacing again.

There is a painting in Hannibal's firelit study, a portrait of a woman on the wall. The woman gazes softly upon something unseen, perhaps at a beautiful flower in her hand, perhaps her newborn child nursing at her bosom. Her face surfaces from the wood, but lines smeared in oil, yet luminescent with a gentle peace Will has never known.

"She looks enviable," Will voices quietly, knowing that Hannibal is listening for even the lowest of whispers. They both are. "Who is she?"

"To us, no one," Hannibal responds, coming up beside her to gaze upon her visage. "To her painter, perhaps every woman."

Will turns to Hannibal, who hands her a warm cup of something with cinnamon in it. Something more appropriate for the winter.

"La Scapigliata, or the Head of a Woman, as she is known to art scholars and enthusiasts," Hannibal explains, tone taking a professorial note. Will inclines her ear. "Da Vinci, as the story is told, was commissioned to paint a Madonna for a marquess' private studio." (1)

"Da Vinci?" Will echoes, looking back to the wood mounted before her, and then back at her host. "Hannibal, is this the original?"

Hannibal merely smiles and inclines his head. Will gapes for a moment, then clicks her mouth shut and presses her lips in a straight line as she takes a step back from the piece. She is afraid of damaging it, and as absurd as the fear is, it feels real.

But Hannibal catches the small of her back with a warm palm, pushes her back forward. "No, no. One does not step away from a work of art. One steps towards it, to appreciate it, perchance to take a piece of it within oneself. That is the proper way, the only way, to honor the artist's vision."
"I don't want to ruin her."

"So look upon her. Holding her at arm's length only serves to dishonor her."

"Can I not look upon her at an arm's length?"

"Can you?"

Will looks at Hannibal, who again pushes upon her back gently, to set her face to face with Da Vinci's nameless muse.

"Look at her. Properly. Do you see? Can you see what she looks at with such serene contentment?"

Will swallows, her throat clicking as her vision expands. The woman's dark hair floats around her head, a mirage for a halo, her smile softly spreading against her blushing cheeks. What does she look at? "I don't know."

Hannibal waits.

"I don't know what in this world would warrant such contentment. If there is anything, I've never known it."

Hannibal hums. Takes a sip of his own drink. Exhales. "To me, her eyes do not focus on any outward object. She is seeing through the filter of an inner state, rather than receiving impressions from the outside world. She is suspended in a state of mind beyond specific thought – suspended in an inner life richer and more beautiful than anything the outside world can ever give her." And then, as if telling her something amusing, Hannibal dips his head to face her with a half-smile. "There are so many paths to contentment if one is open to self-delusion."

A soft sound erupts from the back of Will's throat. She closes her eyes and smiles. Tries not to sag against Hannibal's hand still on her back. Such wisdom from this man's mouth. Such truth. It's refreshing to her ears, her heart so starved of it that it stutters for a moment. She hangs her head and moves back from the painting, from Hannibal, retreating towards the armchair again, where she folds her legs underneath her and sinks slowly with a sigh. Hannibal follows her, of course, and takes his seat back to face her so that they may keep talking. If they don't watch themselves, they will keep talking for the whole night.

"When I was in Orleans," Will tells him, slow and halting as she comes to terms with her own surrender. There is no point in holding back from Hannibal, is there, when the man would only extract it from her with an excruciating touch of kindness and genuine concern. "When I was in Orleans – barely a year in the force – there was a case I walked into as one person and walked away from entirely different. It was a home invasion, the bad kind, you know, the kind you only see play out on TV. Well, this wasn't TV. This was the real thing."

She takes a heartening sip of her drink (chai latte, generous helpings of cinnamon, plenty of froth, maybe a hint of whiskey – Hannibal is trying to get her really drunk, but he's going to have to try harder). Across from her, Hannibal crosses his legs and leans sideways against the arm of the chair. The very picture of an intellectual debonair. How is this Will's reality?

But when Hannibal waits like that, she has to continue.

"The teenage son opened the door, was overwhelmed, and got tackled to the floor. Mother tried to rush them, foolish decision; she was also tackled and held down. They were trussed up and separated, the son upstairs to a bedroom, the mother dragged to the kitchen. Later, we'd find out that she had been shoved into the pantry and pinned against a shelf, bound, gagged, and raped. They had
taken turns with her. The husband came back from whatever errand he had been on just in time to walk in on all of this; rushed the perps instead of calling 911. Can I blame him?” Will shrugs. "The son upstairs was left behind, all tied up, when the rape started. I guess the bastards called their friend down and thought it would all be good as long as the kid stayed tied up. Kid was smart; somehow cut the ropes, jacked the window open, and jumped out from the second floor. Dislocated his hip and fractured his leg in four different places, but he crawled and dragged himself through excruciating pain, all the way down the street to their neighbor for help. They would all be dead if it wasn't for him."

Will sips and pauses in admiring consideration of that boy, now grown to a man with incredible bravery. How many people can claim to be responsible for saving their entire family from sure death?

"This was in one of the nicer neighborhoods – Gentilly, just south of the university. We were there in minutes. Rushed in there, just four of us at first, didn't want to wait for the back-up – for all we knew, the family could be dead. I made the turn into the kitchen just as one of the perps was overwhelming the father. I watched it right in front of me, that bastard grabbing one of the kitchen knives. I shot at him and missed. The knife went into the father's chest. I shot again and clipped the perp's shoulder. The mother was screaming at this point. Her husband was on the floor, bleeding, gasping. Dying."

"Did he?" Hannibal asks, instead of attempting to coddle her with pithy words, instead of telling her that it isn't her fault. She could fall in love with him right then. "Die, I mean."

"No," Will smiles, looking down into her drink. Halfway empty. "He lived. The knife had penetrated shallowly, missing his pericardium by less than an inch, according to the trauma surgeons. Don't know how that's possible given how deep that knife looked lodged into his chest, but he walked out of that hospital and shook my hand weeks later. It was the month before I would get promoted to detective, for that very case. I was twenty-three."

"Very young," Hannibal remarks.

"Far too young, going far too fast," Will tucks her hair behind her ear, an absent-minded motion. "I thought to myself, looking at that man's body on the floor, with the knife in his chest – if I had only been fast enough. If my aim was truer, my fingers firmer. So I deluded myself that by improving this one skill that I was deficient in, I would mitigate all future tragedies with my own capacity. How many hours I spent at the range, how many targets I riddled with bullets, how many mags I wasted on my delusion." Will shakes her head. "What a fool. It took me years to realize that it doesn't matter how good of a sharpshooter I am: if I can't pull that trigger, the bullet goes nowhere."

"You find yourself unable to pull the trigger now?"

Snorting softly, Will tries not to close her eyes and flinch. If she does, she knows she will see Hobbs falling before her gun, blood spouting from his grinning mouth as Will empties an entire clip into his rotten body.

"I spent so much time deluding myself about my own capacity that I forgot what theirs were. What they were capable of, these people. I look at them, I'm confronted by the atrocities that they commit, and I'm paralyzed. I can never shoot them." She purses her lips. "At least, not until this last one."

"What do you think of?" Hannibal shifts, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, steepling his fingers. "What crosses your mind, when you stand before them, paralyzed?"
Will sags back against the chair, huffing, smiling. Trust Hannibal to ask the unexpected. Alana would have asked about this last one, about Hobbs. Hannibal asks about everyone else instead.

"When I look at them, I see beyond what other people see," she says. This is the first time she explains it, willingly and without any utilitarian motive, to another person. "When I look, I see what they see. I feel what they feel. What I have has been labeled many names, but the one that rings truest is 'pure empathy' – I cue tells from their movement, their behavior, their patterns, their words. Somehow, my brain puts it all together, and in that moment, that very second, I am them. I become them." She passes a hand over her face, sighs, and turns to Hannibal. "I know what it sounds like. I'm not – "

"It can be very difficult," Hannibal cuts in, "to shoot down someone you have completely empathized with." His face is open, his tone low and warm, his eyes considering Will in the firelight. Will suddenly trembles with goosebumps. What does he see when looks intently so? "And yet, in order to catch the very worst of them, that is what you must do. That is what is asked of you. Complete empathy."

Will nods, unable to speak. Held in thrall by Hannibal's gaze.

His face falls into a soft cast of sadness. "What casual cruelty they subject you to. Do they even know what they do to you?"

"Know, yes. Understand, I don't think so." Will rocks forward in the chair to place her empty mug on the tabletop nearby. She traces the rim, the handle, the rich glaze of color reflecting the light of the fire. "But I do it to myself, too. I consent to it, because this is how I am useful. This is where I can help people."

"At the cost of yourself?"

At this, Will smiles indulgently. "Is this not what we are all taught to do? Be selfless?"

"Selfless, perhaps. Self-sacrificing? Not in America."

Will is startled into inappropriate laughter, which Hannibal quietly shares. He looks upon her with sharp eyes and a wicked little smile, knowing just what to say to make her smile. Will's heart thuds in its bone cage.

"Surely, though," Hannibal continues after her laughter has subsided into a warm smile, "surely you have loved ones who would rue the way you throw yourself headlong towards hurt. Even the smallest wounds can fester, Will."

Will looks into the fire, absently and with her fingers resting against her lips. "No. No, I don't have anyone. Not anymore. Everything large enough to love eventually disappoints you, then betrays you, and finally forgets you. Only the things small enough to pack into a shoebox – a keepsake, a picture, a letter – only those things stay as they were." (2)

"And yet we all still long for it," Hannibal retorts, though gently. "We all still try. Surely even you do, Will. What with all you've seen."

"What with all of it," Will echoes, shaking her head and smiling at herself. "Such a fool I am."

"We are all fools fumbling about in the dark. When we stumble and fall, the pain teaches us. But even the weakest of us cannot stay down. Even the weakest of us finds it in themselves to stand back up, or crawl, if that's what they can do. And you are certainly not weak, Will. You are one of the strongest people I know."
She looks at Hannibal, this man who is bent on worming his way into her life. She still wonders what he sees. She fears what he will see, the longer he stays. She fears him leaving, because she is a fool. A strong one, but still a fool. "Hannibal, how do you always know what to say?"

Hannibal gives her a secret smile. "I am, after all, a psychiatrist."

Will laughs, and it is genuine. There is no discomfort at his admission, no distrust of his title. Even as he is, with his many accolades and titles, to Will he is simply Hannibal, Just Hannibal, a man she met at a museum on a night she was left alone. A friend who insists on becoming hers. A would-be suitor, perhaps the first true one she has ever had, certainly the most compelling one. She is afraid. She is shatteringly, mind-numbingly afraid.

"What about you?" Will asks him. "Do you have anyone you love?"

"Right now, there is no one else I am courting but you," Hannibal clarifies against her surprise. "I am serious about this, Will. I will say it however many times you require until you believe it, and I will continue to do so even after that."

Ducking again to hide under the fall of her hair, Will shifts in her seat. "People usually court me for reasons and purposes far different than those your actions confess."

"Good," Hannibal declares. "I don't relish any competition, especially if it is for your affections."

"Dear god, you have no shame," Will laughs unsteadily, pressing fingers against her flushed face.

"We have established this, yes." He looks upon her and his mouth softens, as if shaping a word, but he rethinks it, inhales, and begins again. "I have little family left. My aunt and uncle, somewhere in Europe, wherever their bohemian wanderings find them. I do hold a certain level of affection for both of them. They raised me after my parents passed. I lived with them in Paris in my adolescence."

Will nods. "You're fortunate to still have family. My father passed some years ago."

"Your mother?"

"Never knew her."

"Unusual," Hannibal remarks.

"I know. Usually it's the mother who keeps the child. But my father is the exception."

Hannibal tilts his head to regard her. "Like father, like daughter."

Will laughs softly, covering her face with a hand. "Stop."

"You blush beautifully," Hannibal tells her. "I rather like that I make it so."

"God Almighty," Will mutters, dropping her face into both of her hands this time. "Must you be so embarrassing."

"But of course. It is requisite of every courting that a couple embarrass each other."

"Is this you being a psychiatrist again?"

"This is me admiring how charming you look — "

"God, Hannibal."
"– and engineering our conversation so that it may happen more often."

"I give up."

Hannibal's eyes crinkle again in that smile of his that Will is growing alarmingly fond of. "I'm glad. I shall take that as your acceptance of my suit."

"Wait, what?"

But Hannibal stands and takes their empty mugs, excusing himself to the kitchen to replenish them with more drinks, perhaps dessert. Will gapes a while, until she gathers enough wherewithal to get up and follow him into the better lit room.

"Surely you have better things to do," she tries, hovering behind and beside him.

Hannibal only smiles at her, indulgent and fond. "What better to do than to spend time with you?"

"But I – but you – "

He turns around to face her, the two of them now standing in the middle of the kitchen face to face. "Is there anyone else you are reserving your time and affection for?" he asks, and he asks with such straightforward candor that Will is stunned into the truth.

"No, there's no one else."

"And it is the same for me. We are both consenting adults."

Will wants to curl into herself, wants to burn in the heat that sears through her blood at his words. Instead, she swallows the sound that wants to escape her throat and somehow bites out, "I don't want to waste your time. Surely you have other people, better people, to – to court."

"Are you averse to the idea of being with me?"

"No, no, I just – "

"Good. I am glad. I know who I want to spend my time on, Will, and right now, that is you."

"You barely know me."

"And all I ask is that you give me a chance to get to know you, for us to get to know each other, if you are not averse and there is no one else."

"I..." Will looks up at him, left with nothing else to say but this. It hurts, pulling it out of her chest. Everything falls away as she musters all her courage into shaping the words around her tongue. "I'm afraid that you'll know me and walk away from the mess you see."

The most amazing thing happens before Will's very eyes. Hannibal's facade of charm and composure falls away to reveal a raw, eager, scathing burn of hope in his face, as he stares at her, into her. This is the look of a man starved and finally offered with the prospect of sustenance. So taken she is by his earnestness that she doesn't notice his hand come up until his palm is resting against the side of her face in the warmest, gentlest caress.

Air knocks out of Will. She exhales, squeezes her eyes shut, and curves her face into his palm. Her fingernails bite into her skin, fists trembling beside her to keep from doing something stupid. She almost sobs when his thumb brushes along her cheekbone, under her eye.
"Beautiful Will," he sighs, "don't you see I fear the same?"

Will looks up at him, eyes open wide now with wonder. Hannibal reaches down and takes her tight fists, unfurls them, and presses them to his lips.

"Allow me a chance," he repeats, hazel eyes a deep well of promise and warmth. "That is all I ask. I do not need guarantees. Just consider me a chance, Will."

Will takes a breath.

It is past midnight when Will leaves. The neighborhood is deserted but still looks warm and safe as she steps out from underneath the eaves of Hannibal's house. He walks her to her car, as a proper gentleman should, and holds the door open for her as she climbs in.

"Please let me know when you have arrived at your home."

"I'll text you," she nods, fumbling with the keys as she slots them into her ignition. Hannibal begins to pull away, but before he can leave, Will steels her resolve and reaches. "Hannibal."

He stops so that her hand lands on his elbow. They linger long enough that she can see goosebumps rising on the skin of his neck and hands. But he waits for her, waits patiently while she struggles for the right way to say it. After too long of a moment, she gives up on words and leans out of the car, drawing close to press a soft kiss on his cheek. Lips barely brushing his skin, like the mist of a breath dissipating into wintry air. The maid next door could be watching; she is startled by how little she cares.

"Thank you," she tells him, and knows that he understands what is unspoken.

Hannibal hums and returns the kiss, placing his lips against her temple before pulling away to look into her face. "When will I see you again? So that I may continue to convince you of my suit?"

She huffs in amusement and ducks back into car. "I don't know, doctor, you're the one with the exhausting hours."

"I am still free tomorrow."

"So soon, Hannibal?"

"I am impatient for your company."

She sighs. "I have tests to grade; I've been putting them off and they need to get done." The naked disappointment on Hannibal's face comes disturbingly close to dismantling her, a good sign as any that she's had a little too much to drink tonight. "Perhaps this week sometime."

"I shall call you," Hannibal says, as if to warn her that there is no running away.

Will chuckles. "I'll expect it. Good night, Hannibal."

"Bonne nuit, Will. Be safe," he bids, "for me."

Will's breath catches in her chest at his words. Compelled, she reaches out again, her hand touching his cheek for a brief moment. He leans into the touch, almost chases it, eyes never leaving hers. Will
smiles.

"For you, I think I can try."

On the way home, Will drives in a daze. It is not like her disoriented half-waking state when she surfaces from the dreams her mind plays out in her restless sleep. This is a different kind altogether, a cottony daze where all the world's sharp edges are hazy and soft before her eyes.

When she gets home, after letting the dogs out and rubbing down each one of them with a towel, after peeling her clothes off and taking a shower, she stands in front of the mirror, naked and marveling, wondering what in the hell Hannibal sees in all of this. She isn't that pretty. She isn't long-limbed and slender, no curves other women will envy. No; her breasts are a bit too small for her chest, her waist soft and undefined, her arms too muscled from years in her line of work. Her thighs are ordinary and nothing of note, her skin too pale and starving of sunlight. Summer here isn't the same as summer in Louisiana. Here, the sunshine barely warms.

But for the first time in a long time, she looks at herself again and thinks of all the little things Mrs. Bradley had talked to her about, when her long limbs had started sprouting and hair started growing in unwanted places. She wavers for a moment, until the reverberation of Mrs. Bradley's voice in her potent memory pushes her to slowly go about the motions she was taught.

She tends to her eyebrows, plucks them neat. She combs her hair, contemplates a haircut. She smooths lotion on her skin, shaves her legs, trims her nails, wonders if she can manage nail polish without making a mess of herself. Maybe she should go buy a dress.

"My god," she breathes, staggered by the track her thoughts are taking. She stumbles to her bed and crawls into it, wrapping the cold sheets around her bare body. Her legs curl in until her knees are almost to her chest, and she draws the blankets over her head to block out the light. After a moment, she feels one of the dogs climb up and snuffle against her back, likely Winston from the weight and the form. "My god. Hannibal, what are you doing to me?"

Squeezing her eyes shut, she falls asleep.

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6:27am. Her phone is vibrating on the bedside table. When it stops, Winston fetches it and pads across the bed to drop it in front of her face. His nose is cold and wet against her neck. Will shudders. The phone rings again.

"Ugh. Graham." Will sits up in a mound of blankets, the air cold against her naked shoulders, the sheets caressing her arms as they slide down to let her sit there bare.

"Will, I need you in, we have a case, probable Ripper."

"Isn't every case?" she mutters, scrubbing a hand over her face.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, Jack, I'll be there, text me the damn address." She hangs up and lets out a string of curses, to which Winston barks, tail wagging and tongue lolling in front of her face. She rubs his muzzle, placing a kiss in between his eyes. "Not you, Winston. You're a darling. Certainly a smarter darling than Jack. That's it, that's right, good boy."
She crawls out of bed, bare feet flinching against the cold wood. Goosebumps on her skin, she pulls on clothes and tugs her hair into a semblance of presentation. No breakfast again, just coffee; she is still full from Hannibal's sumptuous dinner.

When she gets there, she is glad to have skipped breakfast. The entire team is present. Beverly greets her with her usual convivial cheer, effervescent even in the face of inhuman brutality. "Morning, sunshine," she calls out to Will, who slides out of her SUV and hunches against the brisk winter air.

"Morning. What do we have?"

"Victim was found in a hotel room bathtub. Abdominal mutilations, organ removal on the scene."

Will frowns as they fall into step towards the said hotel. Price falls into step with them, on Will's other side. "Sounds more like an urban legend than the Ripper, right?" he quips with his usual glib indifference.

Will shrugs. Jack meets them at the doors of the hotel. "I've got the room sealed," he says with a certain amount of pride. "You'll get it fresh."

"Fresh?" Will snorts. "As a daisy?"

"Fresh enough for you to tell me whether it's the Ripper or not." Jack eyes her. "Then you can go back to your class. Finals week, right."

"Oh, come now, Jack, you don't want me in a classroom," Will sighs, passing spooked officers stationed at the doors. "You want me to wrap my head so tight around the Ripper I won't go back to class until he's caught."

Jack only shrugs, not bothering at all with even a paltry attempt at denial. "Your bad luck that you're the best."

"Expecting another couple of bodies after this one, are you."

"If it's the Ripper, yes, I am."

Will stops at the elevators, looking Jack in the face. "Don't let the Ripper stir you up. The reason he left you Miriam Lass' arm is so he could poke you with it. Don't let yourself make a mistake, Jack."

Jack's face grows thunderous at the mere mention of Miriam's name, but he does not explode at Will. Not this time. Instead, he just spits, "Why not the rest of her, then."

Will casts her mind open and pulls at her profile of the Ripper, this ever-morphing kaleidoscopic figure in her head, and gives it to Jack straight. "His other victims – he wanted to humiliate them in death. Like a public dissection. To make a point. But her – she was different. He was probably impressed that she was able to find him. So he saved her for something special. Something like this."

Jack's jaw works with rage barely restrained. Will waits it out, the way one can only wait out the wrath of a tornado. There is no running away from it.

After a while, Jack finally speaks in a growl. "He may be starting another cycle, Will."

Sighing momentously, Will looks around and shoves her hands into her jacket pockets. "Look," she says to Jack, "the Ripper contacted you directly. If he was killing again, he wouldn't be subtle about it. He would just pick up the phone again. Any more phone calls, Jack?"
"No," Jack bites out. "But. If this is the Ripper, there'll be at least two more bodies and then nothing for months, maybe a year. We'll have a window of opportunity to catch him and that window will close. The last time the window closed, I lost the Ripper and Miriam. I don't intend to do that again."

The elevator pings open and Jack thunders in. Will rolls her eyes and sends an exasperated glance at Beverly, who raises her hands and follows them into the elevator without a word.

Upstairs, it stands to reason why local police behaved themselves and kept the scene intact. Will can imagine them walking in here, guns out and jaws hanging open in horror and disbelief. Will follows the trail of blood while lending one ear to Price, Zeller, and Beverly rehashing what they have found forensically. Before her eyes, a grisly scene replays itself.

She barely even notices when Jack orders everyone out, only that she watches someone make a monumental blunder and try to fix it. This isn't the scene of a murder, she realizes, this is the scene of someone attempting to save a life.

Will calls the team back in and goes to Jack. "This wasn't a brutal killing. He was trying to save this guy's life, Jack." Jack stares at her as if she's grown a second head.

"Will, it's the Chesapeake Ripper."

"It is not the Ripper, Jack. Do you know the Ripper to have ever tried to save someone's life?"

"There are too many similarities!"

"There aren't enough!"

In the corner of her vision, Will sees the rest of Jack's team edge to the door. They don't want to be caught in the crossfires; Will cannot blame them. She is the only one who has the leverage to make Jack listen, so she will fight the battle. By herself, if she has to. Jack will listen.

"Knife wounds are cuts, not stabs. Anatomical knowledge, dissection skills, mutilation, organs removed, victim clothed and on display – we've got 22 signature components all attributable to the same killer, Will, you made this profile!"

"22 possible signature components, Jack, and yes, I made this profile. Listen to what I am saying. Stop looking for the Ripper in every shadow of every case! This is not him!"

Jack recoils from her, face a montage of surprise and confusion. Something harsh in her tone must have glanced at his stubborn faulty logic. Will hardly ever yells at anybody. "Are you sure?"

Will gentles her tone. "More or less."

"Tell me why you're sure."

"The Ripper," Will sighs, "left the last victim in a church pew, used his tongue as a page marker in the Bible he was holing. This mess isn't that. This is a – a medical student or, or trainee, or, damn, a butcher! Someone trying to make an extra buck in a back-alley surgery, and it went bad." She looks at the body in the tub, the blood smeared on the tiles, the bits of flesh trailed on the floor. Messy. Disorganized. Inexperienced. Immature. "This went actively bad, Jack."

When Jack looks at the scene again, he sees. Will can tell by the way he deflates, his shoulders sagging under his greatcoat, the fight bleeding from his bones. Will feels sorry for him, and for Miriam Lass.
"You'll catch the Ripper eventually."

"Yeah, well, I want to catch him now," Jack grumbles. "And when I do, you're not gonna get a chance to shoot him, 'cause I'm gonna do it."

Will nods, purses her lips, and motions the team back in. Mere seconds and the room is flooded with a swarm of plastic-armored technicians. Price and Zeller take helm, directing the fastidious collection of precious forensic evidence. Will remains quiet for a while, stepping aside with Jack as they both watch the proceedings.

"Tell me how you see the Ripper, Will."

Will turns to Jack, who is looking at her with a burning sort of desperation in his eyes. Jack races against a clock Will does not see. Will is afraid that his haste will mean fatal mistakes.

"I see him as one of those pitiful things sometimes born in hospitals. They feed it, keep it warm, but they don't put it on the machines. They let it die." Nearby, Beverly turns to her, looks at her, as if seeing her in a new light. See, this is why Will is always afraid of being seen. People look at her like that and then soon they walk away, they disappear. Hannibal will too, one day. Maybe, maybe she should just make the best of it?

"And then?"

"They let it die, but he doesn't die, Jack. He survives. He lives on. He grows up. He looks normal." Will looks Jack in the eyes, trying to tell him that this quarry he chases is an intelligent beast. "And though they see him, Jack, nobody can tell what he is."

She spends a majority of the morning at Quantico, even though it is a Sunday and she has class again tomorrow. It seems only fair when the rest of the team is working. She tries to help where she can, but though she is a trained forensic anthropologist, her expertise in running tests and managing labs does not extend as far as Beverly's capacities. Still, she tries to help, setting slides and pressing buttons where Beverly tells her to.

After half a day of working on a day off, Jack releases her. She leaves gratefully and sets out into the bright sunlight, stopping at a beauty shop to buy some... things she might need.

Inside, fluorescent lights flood the colorful displays and a bright, happy song filters down from above. A store associate greets her with coin-thick makeup and a routine smile. She nods back and disappears into the shelves; though she hasn't done this in a while, she knows what she is looking for. Thirty minutes later, she walks out of the store with makeup and three shades of lipstick, eyeliner, perfume, and a new brand of lotion. When she thinks of how much money she just spent, Will forcefully diverts her thoughts towards Hannibal. Think of Hannibal.

Mrs. Bradley will be so proud.

The paper bag rests on her passenger seat on the way home, a subtle reminder in the corner of her vision. A sign of commitment, if anything. Hannibal would be happy, if he knew.

At home, she puts it away and spends a long-overdue afternoon walking the dogs in the woods. It is a good weather to walk, anyhow, with a bright sun and a mild breeze. She hikes her scarf up to cover her chin and clicks her tongue, encouraging the dogs to keep pace. "Come on, Buster! Up,
They make it all the way to the river, where she lets them romp at the water's edge. They don't dare dip, what with the water freezing cold at this time of year. They're smarter than that. But they do get mud on their coats, and a grin splits Will's face now that she has an entire night of bathing her stinky dogs to look forward to. She plays several rounds of fetch with them. When the sun is cresting over the horizon, only then does she whistle and gather them back to her, making way through the underbrush towards her isolated home.

Dark falls as they emerge from the treeline. Her house glows like a boat, Will's boat, upon the dark sea. Her safe haven. Her little place in this world.

Together with her friends, she approaches the house, taking care to stop them before they all trample through the door with their muddy feet. She holds them all at the porch and rubs them down with rags and towels, until at least their paws are clean. She's finishing Winston's hind legs when she spots the blue paper bag with a ribbon and a card sitting on a wooden stool she has by her front door.

Will straightens, rag still in hand, and goes to pick up the bag, turning it over carefully. When she brings it close, she takes a whiff of a familiar scent and knows it as Hannibal's soft perfume. Suddenly she's overcome with discomfort. She doesn't want to sully it with her muddy hands.

Carefully, she puts it down on the stool. Once the dogs are suitably clean, she lets them in, taking the bag gingerly with her cleanest fingers and depositing it on the kitchen table. Dogs first, before they track dirt everywhere.

It takes her a near hour to bathe all of them (which, mind you, is quite efficient for seven dogs) and it is a testament to her patience that she does not once act on the thought of abandoning her chore to see what Hannibal has sent her. He must have hired a courier to deliver it; she must have been in the woods with the dogs. Will didn't see it earlier when she came home.

She takes a shower too, for good measure, before she finally fetches the blue paper bag. Upstairs. She'll open it upstairs. She strips out of her pajama bottoms and crawls into bed, clad in just her underwear and a ratty old cotton shirt, the paper bag clutched between her greedy paws. With exquisite care, she unfolds the card pinned to the front.

My dearest Will,

It is my hope that you will take this small token as a gift to mark a beginning. Though I do not intend to give up, perhaps this will provide you with a measure of confidence and reassurance that even should this attempt of ours not work out, we did try, and my affection for you was real.

There are grand proclamations I wish to give you, but I shall withhold them, for now. You cannot yet find it in yourself to trust me, but you can trust that this token of mine for you is small enough to fit in a shoebox.

Eagerly longing for your company,
H.L.

The air escapes from Will's lungs in a soft, smooth exhale. She sags against her pillows, fingers trembling as she brushes them over fine stationery and even finer penmanship. After a few seconds of staring at it, she brings the note to her nose and lips, closes her eyes, breathes in.

Hannibal. It smells like Hannibal.

She could have and would have held that note to her face for the whole night, but Winston climbs up
the bed as per his custom and rustles the paper bag beside her. "Right," she mutters to herself. "Gift."

Courted. Will is being courted. She repeats this in her head, incredulous, as her hands pluck a small jewelry box from the paper bag.

"...no way."

Jewelry already? It's not a ring, is it? Surely not. Hannibal knows better. With trembling fingers, she pops it open –

"Oh."

It is a necklace, rose gold, with a rose pendant seemingly carved in minute detail from mother of pearl. A fine thing, finer than anything Will has ever known – she has to get used to this, doesn't she? If Hannibal is courting her, there will be more. And she can't refuse, because she gave her permission, and refusing would mean that she refuses him. How could she refuse him? She's already long fallen.

Will lifts the fine chain from the box and loops it around her neck, fumbling with the fastening. It is cold against her skin. She takes the pendant between two fingers and traces it, holds it against her chest. The paper bag falls to the floor, forgotten. She places the note on her bedside table, folded and put back in its envelope. Winston curls into her as she cocoons herself within her blankets.

Her breaths shudder in and out of her body. She is falling in love.

In the morning, she remembers her manners. Will calls him first thing, while her coffee is brewing downstairs. Outside, snow is falling in thick, fat flakes.

"Will?"

"Good morning," Will smiles, coveting the rougher, lower register of his sleepy voice. "Thank you for the necklace."

He hums and audibly shifts. Perhaps still in bed. She has a hard time imagining it, but somehow craves the image all the same. "You are very welcome. Are you wearing it now?"

Will's fingers seek it, tracing the shape of the rose she knows she will be very familiar with in the future. "I am. It's beautiful."

"No more than you are," Hannibal tells her, fully capable of flustering her even from so far away.

"Why a rose?" Will asks, curious and unaccustomed to being ascribed such a gentle, beautiful symbol.

"Because I have waited so long to find you. To me, you are the rose on barren earth."

Will's breadth stills in her lungs. Be the blossoming rose on barren earth, Mrs. Bradley had once told her under a setting Southern sun. It takes a moment before she can collect herself. "Someone I know well," she says, "from a long time ago told me those very words."

Hannibal hums again. "Then it must be fate. And I must thank this person."
The thought of Hannibal meeting doting old Mrs. Bradley amuses Will so much she has to chuckle. "Mrs. Bradley wouldn't let you leave for the whole afternoon once she finds out what you're after, Hannibal."

"I would be delighted to keep her company, if she were so astute that she saw in you then what I see now."

Will has nothing to say to that. She turns and rests her back against the bathroom counter, more to face away from the mirror. She looks down at her feet. Her toenails, maybe she should paint them.

"When can I see you again, Will?"

Quantico today. Tomorrow, too. For the rest of the week unless Jack pulls her out to the field again.

"That depends on when you're free, doctor."

"This evening," Hannibal immediately responds, to her amusement. So eager for her company. "I work twelve-hour shifts for the rest of the week and on Saturday."

"Ouch." Will struggles to hide her disappointment. Suddenly she does want to meet him tonight, because she won't be able to see him again until the following weekend. "Shall I meet you somewhere this evening, then?"

"Will you humor me another dinner?"

"Does anyone ever refuse your dinners?" Will chuckles, rubbing her leg against Winston's flank. Her coffee must be done brewing and he's fetching her to get it. "Of course I'll come."

"Excellent," Hannibal declares, somehow sounding delighted despite the tone of his voice remaining the same. "I look forward to it."

"Can I request something?" Will asks before she loses her nerve.

"Anything."

"I was going to have some sort of seafood tonight."

Will can see the smile that accompanies Hannibal's voice. "And you still shall."

"Alright. I'll let you keep the rest of it a surprise." Winston tugs at her sleeve. "I need to go soon, Hannibal."

"Very well. Have a good day at work, Will. I shall see you tonight."

"Tonight," Will echoes in agreement. When the line disconnects, she puts her phone down and presses both hands to her warm face. Her fingers map out a smile that is foreign to her. The smile stays with her until Quantico.

Jack finds her soon enough, though she was making no effort to hide. She is handing back papers to her beginner profiler's class when Jack's shadow looms at the door. "Find yours and pass it on," Will says, giving a student at the front row the stack of graded papers. "One moment."
"Will." Jack doesn’t look too fractious today.

"Jack," Will looks behind him, where a young lady stands quietly attentive. "You're not here for a crime scene."

"Not today, no," Jack says, stepping aside. "This is Ms. Ariadne Black, a student at George Washington working on her master's degree in criminal psychology. She'll be following you for her interim here."

Will blinks. "I wasn't aware we were accepting students for internship so late."

"Dr. Bloom asked nicely," Jack concedes. "Ms. Black comes with high recommendations. I felt that it would be appropriate to allow her to shadow you, now that I've started to pull you back to the field. You'll need all the help you can get."

"Thanks, Jack, that's generous of you," Will says, not entirely without sarcasm. She has handled post-graduate interns in the past, and while they do help with some tasks, they also take up a lot of Will's time, because she actually teaches them instead of using them as slaves like most supervisory agents tend to do. But Will does see the generosity of the assignment: Jack is offering her extra hands to help manage the accelerating pace of her cases. (Whose fault is that, she wonders?) "Good to meet you, Ms. Black, I'm Will Graham. Er, supervisory agent."

"Thank you for having me, Agent Graham."

"Come in, then," Will says, exchanging nods with Jack, who steps away. "Welcome to the beginner profiler's class, though the semester's about done."

Ariadne Black sits in an empty spot in the front row and listens to Will's final lecture for the class. These same students, if they have achieved sufficient marks, will be back next year for the continuation of the profiler classes, but Will isn't so sure she'll still be teaching at that time. As it is, Jack already has her almost every day on a case.

"Just remember," she says to them, "to look underneath what's underneath. Plenty of you already do so; you came here because you knew you had a... shall we say, knack for the monsters." Will sees Ariadne tilt her head. "The very best of them will require the very best in you if you want to capture them – I don't mean that as a trite sentiment, I mean that as a warning. Some of them aren't human anymore; you'll need to remember what makes you human in order to stay in the game."

Her class, as always, looks up at her rapt and eager. Even more so now after Jack has had her completing case after case. In some faces, she sees a bit of worship, and sighs.

"Go home, go back to your families, enjoy the holidays. Forget about this. Time will come when you won't be able to." She turns her back on them and puts the few of her belongings she has on the table back into her bag. "Class dismissed."

With assorted holiday greetings and gratitudes, the class files out of the room. Will waits until the noise dies down. When she turns around, Ariadne Black is standing near the desk, looking like she's building up to a question. Will smiles. They always have questions.

"What is it?" Will prompts her.

Ariadne Black blinks, taken aback, but recoups quickly. "When you say 'what makes us human' – what do you mean by that?"

What an odd question. "Love," Will says after a pause, "kindness, compassion, generosity. Envy,

"I see,” Ariadne Black sighs, tucking her chin to her chest and looking to the side. Her tone belies her words.

"Do you?" Will asks, feeling out of her depth but for some reason forging on. "Are you having a hard time thinking of something that reminds you of your own humanity, Ms. Black?"

A tremor of something flashes across her new intern's face. (Of course Jack gives her the, ah, unique ones.)

"Do you have any friends, family, special people in your life?"

Will doesn't even realize that she was dreading the answer until Ariadne's face clears and a small smile emerges. "Oh, yes, I have my twin, er, friend."

"Your twin friend."

"We're roommates, she's been my friend for a very long time. We're like twins now."

"Ah," Will says,shouldering her bag and turning to walk out of the room. "Well, that's good. Hang on to her."

Ariadne chuckles quietly, following her down the hall. "Oh, I try, but she tries to break away sometimes."

They retreat to Will's small office, where she clears the second small desk by the wall for her new intern. "The previous intern used this desk. It's yours now. Barring extenuating circumstances, you'll be with me for your entire internship. Usually the interns are all over the place in the summer, but you're off-season, so you're not on the 10-week track. How long are you here for?"

"Dr. Bloom helped me negotiate a half year with Agent Crawford."

"A whole half year?" Will repeats in surprise. That means her skills are good enough that they are already preparing to hire her. Jack doesn't do it often; the last time he did, it was with Will. She tries not to feel like she's already being replaced, but the irritating thought remains.

"I hope it won't be a problem," Ariadne turns back towards her, having been peering out the office window. "I'll try to stay out of your way."

"No, no," Will shakes her head, "I was just surprised; Jack doesn't do that very often. Your purpose here is to learn, and staying out of the way contradicts that. I fully expect you to be involved in every aspect of every case. And no," Will adds, after seeing her look of surprise, "you won't be substituting to teach my classes, even though you're more than qualified to do so. You'll stay with me. You'll learn more with me. If I get called to crime scenes, you come too. Which reminds me, I'll need your phone number."

Ariadne surrenders her contact information with ill-concealed delight. Most interns get left behind by their supervising agents, but those agents aren't Will. Will leads them to the very thick of it, as a warning more than anything, so they know what they're getting into. She wonders in the back of her mind if Ariadne is aware of her track record with interns.

"I hope you're prepared to be woken at ungodly hours of the night," Will warns her, "because Jack
has no respect for business hours."

"Oh, that's alright," Ariadne says with a smile, sitting on her chair and experimentally spinning it around like a child. "I'm an insomniac anyway."

Wonderful, Will thinks, returning to her desk to sort through case papers. A fellow oddball.

"You are occupied with different thoughts tonight," Hannibal tells her as she is rolling up her sleeves. Will has managed to persuade him to allow her into his kitchen. She can't help but wonder how rare and difficult this is for him, as territorial as he is with his kitchen, but Hannibal acts no different than he has before: affectionate, attentive, amused.

She accepts the weight of the knife in her hand (artisan-fine blade, high-quality metalwork, looks Japanese) and begins peeling the potatoes. "I have a new intern."

Hannibal makes a soft sound in the back of his throat.

"She's interesting," Will adds.

That encourages a smile. "Neither negative nor positive."

"I don't know yet. It's too early to say." Will pauses to present her potatoes to Hannibal; he nods and tells her to start dicing them. "She comes highly recommended. Her credentials aren't anything to scoff at. She's working on her master's in crim psych. Undergrad from Cambridge, first class honors, psychology, minor concentration in sociology."

"Impressive," Hannibal agrees. "It speaks to your expertise that your superior assigns her to you."

Will pauses her methodical dicing and sighs at the man standing across the counter. "Do you plan on turning everything into flattery?"

"I am merely underlining what is true."

"That's a yes, then."

"You do not deny it," Hannibal smiles, though not at her. He keeps his eyes on his task, filleting their fish with care and great skill that speaks of confidence. "You know your own capacity. You are simply unused to it being brought to positive light. I think you have been around too many people who treat you as a tool, Will."

Jack immediately comes to mind; Will swallows the bitter taste in her mouth and resumes dicing. "Well," she says quietly, "I am regarded as one of the best in my field. I'm good at what I do." After another pause, she adds, "It's the only thing I can really do."

"Not so," Hannibal counters as he rubs the fish down with herbs and spices. Will has to look away from his large hands, which are tan and long-fingered and overrun with veins. "You can teach, and you do it well. That is a rare gift."

"You haven't even seen me hold a class," Will laughs.

"I can tell the makings of a good teacher," he shrugs, "and I am sure there are other things you are good at. Perhaps some of then you've forgotten, either by chance or by choice."
"Other things, like what? I'm only a passable cook," she makes a sideways gesture with the knife in her hand.

"Other hobbies? They are usually the things we become most proficient at in life."

"What are your hobbies, Hannibal?"

"Cooking."

Will laughs. "Yes, I got that part."

"Drawing and sketching. Music."

"What do you play?" Will asks eagerly.

"Harpsichord, piano, some violin," Hannibal lists. "You ask with the curiosity of someone who knows music. What do you play, Will?"

"Just the piano."

"Just the piano," Hannibal repeats while washing his hands. "You play well?"

"I'm out of practice."

"That's not a no."

Will shakes her head again, neatly depositing the diced potatoes in a bowl. Hands now idle, she flattens them on the counter top and leans her weight on them. "I don't know many pieces, only those Mrs. Bradley taught me."

"Will you play for me?" Hannibal asks her with an entreatling, soft look. It's good that he's across the counter. Will's fingers flex, wanting to touch his face.

"I haven't played for anyone in a long time." Hannibal waits for her in the warm silence. The pot of soup bubbles under his careful stirring. Will continues, "A song for a song?"

Hannibal gifts her then with a private smile. "A fair trade."

"Afraid it won't be that fair, you'll be a better player than me," Will washes her hands and dries them with a yellow towel. "What else would you like help with?"

"You may perhaps assist with the rice, while telling me more about your new intern."

"Little to tell. She just has curious responses. She asked me what I meant about things that make people human." Will recalls the curious look on Ariadne Black's face, an open but also utterly blank expression indicating a total lack of understanding. Will has to wonder how that feels, because Will often understands too much. "It's like she had to think hard about what that constituted for her."

"Those of us who are able to think of an answer quickly are indeed fortunate."

Will looks up at Hannibal. He is searing the herb-crusted fish on a flat pan, with a look that conveys contentment and warmth. Will knows, and shivers at her knowing, that it is because of her.

"I guess I mustn't be too helpless, after all, if I am still counted among the fortunate."

He looks up at her then, considering. "Do you speak of how they regard your singular gifts in
particular psychiatric circles?"

"Or even in conventional ones," Will shrugs, leaning against the counter behind her and smoothing her hands down her borrowed apron. "I sound worse in the conventional circles. I sound like a total lunatic."

Hannibal remains quiet for a while, working on their food with seamless flow. Will watches him, watches his focused eyes and serene countenance. Will watches his shoulders, his arms, the way the muscles flex, the assured manner with which he handles his tools. This is a competent, confident man. Will watches him and marvels; here is someone she knows to be rare and unprecedented in the world.

"There is and has always been a rift between those who are exceptionally gifted and those who are ordinary people," Hannibal softly begins. "Likewise, there is and will always be a rift between those who we judge to be sane, and those who..."

"...are not," Will finishes for him, eyebrows raised. "Don't need to sugarcoat it for me. I know what they think."

"As long as you understand that it's not what I think."

"What do you think, Dr. Lecter?"

"I think you are exceptionally gifted, you know this, and you doubt it because people tell you otherwise."

"Yes, well," Will frowns, "some gifts are unwanted."

"Is yours?"

When Will looks up, Hannibal is right there before her, close enough to touch and yet holding himself apart. He meets her eyes, holds her captive.

"Let's be honest, Will. You and I both don't know what it's like to be anything other than what we are. You want a different life as much as I want it, which is not at all. You enjoy your gift, as difficult as it is, because it gives you a purpose, a unique directive, perhaps even an excuse."

Will shivers but doesn't look away. She doesn't want to look away. "You know my gift. What's your gift, Hannibal?"

He smiles. "What do you think it is, if you had to guess?"

She blinks through her perception of him, everything and all at once, this singular man who has stumbled upon her and insinuated himself into the fabric of her life. He is so unlike anything that she has ever known. Perhaps her own affection is clouding her insight. She cannot see beyond the warm smile, the comfortable silence. The company.

"Assurance," Will says, "of your place in the world and of everyone else's around you. It allows you to move through life with confidence. It gives you strength where my empathy takes mine away."

"Because your empathy subsumes you," Hannibal sighs, reaching up and brushing a lock of her hair aside. His fingertips graze against her cheek, making her eyelashes flutter. "You absorb the imprints of the hands that handle you. You echo the screams of the dead you give voice to. You mirror the darkness the guilty leave for you."
Will exhales, long and ragged, blinking rapidly even as his thumb rests on her cheek. The warmth sears into her skin. Shortly thereafter, he takes his hand away. Somehow it feels as if he takes something else with him, something like a thorn that has been lodged deep into the flesh of her heart. Her chest aches. She doesn't know yet if it's a good feeling.

"Dinner will be ready in half an hour," Hannibal states, as he sets the fish in the oven. "Shall we retire to the study so you may play a song for me?"

Will is startled by his eagerness and laughs. "No, no, you asked for this so you go first."

He washes and wipes his hands down with a smile. "Very well, Will. As you wish."

Oh, but Will wishes for many things.

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_The mind is its own place, and the Places inhabited by the insane and the exceptionally gifted are so different from the places where ordinary men and women live, that there is little or no common ground of memory to serve as a basis for understanding or fellow feeling._ - Alduous Huxley, "The Doors of Perception"

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**REFERENCES**

(1) **La Scapigliata** is a painting in oil on wood by Leonardo da Vinci, currently housed in Galleria Nazionale di Parma in Italy. I recently saw it in person and had to include it somewhere... It dates from 1508 and is considered a finished painting even though it looks like a sketch.

(2) **Everything large enough to love eventually disappoints you, then betrays you, and finally forgets you. Only the things small enough to pack into a shoebox – a keepsake, a picture, a letter – only those things stay as they were.** - Anthony Marra, "The Tsar of Love and Techno"

(3) **Jun's Temari Sushi Balls video** made me think of the last scene. Knife skills: Asian. But also, cat! (The cat's name is Kohaku and it has a fluffy tail. Now go watch the video.)

(4) **Ariadne Black**, Will's new intern, is Felicity Jones in my headcanon. Because I can.
She sits down to post her students' final grades the next morning and is perhaps more generous than she usually is. Will can still feel the phantom warmth of Hannibal's touch on her skin. Suffice it to say that her distraction makes itself known when the dogs fuss at her for not paying them adequate attention. After she finishes posting the grades online, she leaves her laptop to tend to them, amusing them with toys because it's too cold to let them out. But otherwise, she spends the day in silence, as if to make up for all the words that have been wrenched out of her the previous night. There is nothing left within her, not even a shade of her dark thoughts. Hannibal has taken it all. She nothing left to say.

The first bit of noise comes past midday, when the sun is beginning to slant through the tops of her west-facing windows. It shatters the silence, ringing from across the house where she has left her cellphone in the kitchen. The dogs snuffle around her. She puts down her book and gets up to fetch it. Jack, of course.

"Jack."

"Will, we need you in."

"Another case so soon?"

"Not local," Jack says, "but we can finally take over. We may have a killer who finally crossed state lines. You're flying to Texas tonight."

"Wait," Will frowns, putting down her cup of tea and bracing herself against the counter. "I'm going alone?"

"You have my full authority. I'm calling the section chief of the field office in Dallas, letting him know we're sending our best profiler. We've been polite about it, but we're about done waiting for them to call us in. I'll be following you in a few days if you don't resolve it by then; the Director requires my presence in the meantime," Jack heaves a sigh. "You can take Katz with you. Oh, and your intern."

Will presses her lips together. "You said we can 'finally' go. Which case is it I'm barging into?"

"The recent bodies they've found in the Killing Fields, there are a few of them we're pegging as serial. Pattern's emerging. There's a fresh body, except it's not in Texas; in fact, it's quite far from the
Killing Fields. But I looked over the files myself and I have a feeling. I want you to go see it."

"Oh," Will nods, looking out the window at her backyard. "Fortunate for us he left Texas, then."

"It is. Files in your inbox. Talk to McGregor for funds and booking your flight. Same protocol. You've done this before."

"Yes, I have." And she has, except it's been a while that her leash has been so long and so loose. The very concept is now foreign to her. "I'll try to keep it short."

"Stay for as long as you need," Jack dismisses. "No one cares about the cost as long as you solve it. These are lives we're talking about. They're expecting you tonight, SSA Graham."

"Tonight," Will nods, even though Jack can't see her. "...thanks, Jack."

Will puts her phone face down on the counter and leans heavily against it, eyes fixed with a thousand-yard stare. Supervisory Special Agent Graham. It hasn't been an easy road, but she's beginning to get what she wanted from Jack. Recognition, acknowledgement, trust: weighty things she has had to fight him for. Now all she has left to do is to prove that they haven't been misplaced.

Inhaling deep, she gathers herself and goes upstairs to pack a go-bag. One week should be enough. While packing, she texts Beverly, who responds quickly and agrees to pick her up after dogs are dropped off. Texts Ariadne, who offers to meet them at Dulles. Calls McGregor, who has her federal credit card cleared for use and her flight details ready. She doesn't dare look at the files in her inbox until they're on the plane, until she's done all she needs to do to take care of her house and ensure all is in order while she's gone.

Two hours later, showered, dressed, packed, and in the process of coaxing the dogs into her car, she remembers Hannibal. Will locks her doors and steps out to the porch, where she pulls out her phone to text him... except she swipes to the dial screen and calls him instead.

"Hello, Will."

She can hear the smile in his voice and echoes it. "Hannibal, hi."

"While I am delighted to hear your voice again so soon, I must admit to my surprise."

"I have to leave town for work," Will tells him. "I wanted to let you know. Maybe, um. The next dinner will be after I come back."

"Ah, yes, of course," Hannibal concedes, ever gracious though audibly disappointed. "Will you be long?"

"I don't know. A week at most, I hope. It depends." Hannibal will be at work for the whole week anyway. This will prevent her from imposing herself upon him when he needs rest.

He sighs. "The uncertainties of our occupation, how it interferes with everything else in our lives."

Will snorts, smiling. "For some people, their occupation is their life."

"Is that a jab at me, or at yourself?"

"Myself, mostly, but you're not exempt, Hannibal Lecter, MD, PhD, PsyD, et cetera."

"We make a beautiful pair," Hannibal then says with an undertone of laughter. Will bites her lip to keep quiet. He continues, "You remember my proposition. I am available to you whenever you
Will clears her throat. "Thank you. I... um. When I get a moment, I'll call you."

"Good. Please take care of yourself and be safe for me."

Again, that phrase. It sends a shiver down her spine. Will attempts some levity with a soft chuckle. "Afraid the world will get to me, doctor?"

"Afraid you'll let it." Somehow, Hannibal turns her insides warm, even when miles away. "I will see you when you return, Willow Graham."

"Yes," she agrees, "you will."

Will leaves the dogs at a pet boarding she trusts, then drives back home to wait for Beverly to pass by. With nothing else to do, she fires up her laptop and downloads all of the files in her secure inbox. By the time Beverly rolls around, she is engrossed in the case reports that date back to almost a decade of intermittent investigation, filed for the most part by Texas Rangers. Seven bodies over eight years, odd deaths in a small town, where bodies have a penchant for turning up unwarranted. Only the FBI thought to separate these out from the rest.

Beverly rolls into her driveway. Will shuts her laptop, takes her bags, and hops in. "This victim makes eight," Will tells her, to which Beverly raises both eyebrows.

"Okay, hello to you too, sunshine."

"Oh, hi," Will opens her laptop again after fastening her seat belt. "Don't pretend you haven't looked at the files yourself."

Beverly shrugs, pulling back into the paved driveway and speeding up. "Mostly the forensic reports. Didn't have time to get into the actual police reports. I had a feeling you would enlighten me anyway."

"The first reports weren't very detailed, but they've gotten better over the years. Law enforcement in small towns, they have nothing better to do. League City PD interviewed just about everybody living there."

"And it drove the killer across state lines into Oklahoma?" Beverly asks dubiously. "That's kinda far from Houston."

"Whatever the case may be, it's fortunate for us," Will says, gathering pictures of all the victims to compare their appearances. All female, all blonde, all long-haired and blue-eyed. If the bodies weren't dumped along the famed Texas Killing Fields, people would have paid attention faster. "Oklahoma has no clue what to do with themselves. The body's been transported to Dallas, but Oklahoma called us in. I think the Rangers were trying to keep feds out of the case, now that a true pattern is emerging. Never mind that the tip about the pattern came from us. They're touchy about that area; so many dead bodies, unsolved... can't be good for the ego."

Beverly scoffs. "Too bad, so sad; now they get us."

Will snorts. "Two women with advanced degrees, gainfully employed in federal law enforcement,
won't exactly be well-received in Texas."

"Is it really that bad in the South?"

"Bev, unless it's East Texas, it ain't the South."

"Whoa," Beverly leaned back from Will, blinking. "That drawl. You hide it well."

"It doesn't exactly sound intelligent," Will sighs.

"I think it's charming!"

"I sound like a back-country hick," she points out unkindly, "and not the charming kind, but the white trash kind."

"Your words, man," Beverly says, staring at the road with raised eyebrows.

"Anyway," Will sighs, "let's go to where the most recent body was found first. Lebanon, Oklahoma."

"Where's that?"

"Like every other spot where a body was found: nowhere."

At the airport, her peculiar intern is already waiting with a small suitcase, a shoulder bag, and a cup of tea. Will almost smiles at the very English manner Ariadne fusses over the proper amount of cream and sugar. It reminds Will of Hannibal: that European flair for the smaller, finer things in life. She's also relieved to find that this intern, at least, has the good sense to dress appropriately in comfortable, nondescript clothing. The previous one had a preference for heels.

They land in Dallas Love Field late in the evening, conveniently a 5-minute ride to check in at the FBI Dallas Field Office from where they borrow a car for federal use. It is almost 10pm when they make it to Oklahoma. Will spends the last hour of their drive making calls to the Marshall County Sheriff's Office, asking for an escort to the exact location from where the body was retrieved. They arrive to what seems like the entire crew, with police cars stationed in intervals along the street.

"I guess Marshall County doesn't need any policing tonight," Ariadne muses aloud.

Beverly snorts, navigating through the well-paved but narrow single-lane roads leading them deeper into the woods around Lake Texoma. "But I gotta say, this is perfect dumping ground for a serial killer. You can't possibly get more isolated and covered than this."

"Lots of low brush," Will notes through the half-dark. It's an ashen hour of night, blackish-grey and almost readable like the undisturbed pages of burnt paper. "Lots of insect life too. Expect degraded evidence. But if there are insects, we can use them."

"I got my kit," Beverly sing-songs as they park behind a police car and step out. It takes no more than two seconds for an officer to approach them.

"Ma'am," the officer stiffly salutes, "Deputy Newman. My partner and I were the first responders to the call. May I assume you're FBI?"
"SSA Graham, profiler," Will flashes her badge awkwardly, "this is Special Agent Katz, CSI, and my intern, Ms. Black. Could you take us to where the body was found?"

"Of course," he nods, eagerly leading the way. Deputy Newman is brown-haired, tall, looks athletic, and still has the bright glint of youthful optimism in his eyes. This must be his first violent crime case. Will exchanges a look with Beverly, who is visibly amused, and starts walking.

Deputy Newman walks them down the farm road, off the cement, and along a path to the edge of the water. Will spies another police car around the bend. A pair of officers hover behind them, remaining on the road while they wander to investigate the area. The exact spot is cordoned off with the requisite yellow tape, but other than that, the area is oddly open.

"We found her here last night. She was face down and naked. I thought at first that it was something else, like a carcass of a large animal."

Beverly makes a soft sound of surprise. "Are there large animals around here, other than cattle?"

"Well, no, ma'am," Deputy Newman scratches the back of his neck, "but there's a wildlife refuge nearby, on the other side of the lake."

"That'd be Texas," Beverly adds.

"Correct."

Beverly turns to Will. "Well, boss?"

Will turns on her spot. "This is a very open area. Visible from the road. Odd place to dump a body. It would have been smarter to do so further up the road, where there was brush to conceal it from people driving by. How many people live in Lebanon?"

"Uh, about 300?"

"How many people like to come to the lake?"

"Most everybody," the young deputy shrugs. "S'why we we patrol at night. Lotsa trailers up the road, people like to sail their boats... at least one patrol car is stationed to drive around once a night." Will gets the impression that it isn't a popular assignment to be given, perhaps the reason why a green deputy was the one who found the body.

"There really isn't much left here, Will," Beverly has gone past the yellow tape and is squatting low to the ground, panning her flashligh tback and forth. "I mean, apart from earth. The water seems like it's risen and receded since last night, whatever's left over won't be much to go on."

"Don't bother," Will mutters, looking around. "We'll know more from the body. Will you give me a moment?"

"Right, sure, you can do your thing." Beverly hops up and whacks Deputy Newman on the arm. "Come and tell me more about Lebanon, Oklahoma. Will needs a moment to do her thing."

"...there's really nothing to tell..."

Will hears more than sees Beverly working her magic as they walk away. The night is growing darker, but the water reflects the moon's light enough that she can see the faint outline of trees and brush in the distance. She puts her hands in her jacket pockets, inhales, and closes her eyes.
Perhaps she stands there for five, ten minutes. There is still an insistent chill in the air, for winter is soon upon this region; it creeps under Will's jacket and makes her shiver. She tugs her collar up and walks back to the road. Beverly looks at her expectantly; she shakes her head.

"This isn't where she was killed, or even dumped. The body washed up here."

"Ugh," Beverly groans, tossing her head back. "Fuck. There won't be anything on the body left for me. The water will have taken all of it."

"I suspect there wouldn't have been anything left for you anyway," Will tells her, but it's more for the officers around them. "This one's not that careless. Thank you for your time, gentlemen," she tells the officers. "Bev, we're heading back to Dallas. I want to see the body."

"That's all?" Deputy Newman asks, perhaps incredulous that they are leaving after a mere fifteen minutes.

Will gives him a grim smile. "Oh, I doubt it, Deputy. I sincerely do."

"So he kills them," Beverly sounds out, "but leaves no marks on the body, apart from evidence suggesting strangulation in most and evidence of sexual intercourse in all of them. How is that possible?"

Will takes a bite of her muffin while guiding the car around a bend single-handed. "They don't struggle. Somehow he immobilizes them without harming them. The intercourse is pre-mortem?"

"Yep. Somehow the girls agreed to have sex with this asshole before they were killed, and they're not prostitutes... he manages subduing them without ligature marks."

"Pharmacological?"

"Nothing in the autopsy reports."

"I don't trust them. I do, however, trust you. Look over them again. Look over the actual sheets, not just the final report."

"Wow. Do I get a gold medal for earning Will Graham's trust? I feel like I should. Or at least a certificate. I'll put it up on my wall. Z's gonna be so jealous. It'll intimidate all the interns. Can I—"

"Shut it," Will grunts, finishing the last bit of her muffin. She dusts her fingers off and takes a swig of her coffee. "...a dinner," she concedes. Beverly fist-pumps. "One dinner."

"Aw, come on. Do I at least get free booze?"

"If you behave yourself."

Beverly raises a palm and crosses her heart; Will rolls her eyes.

"Should we wait until tomorrow to barge into Dallas PD?" Beverly asks.

"Are you tired?"

"Wired, more like. I've had so much coffee, and that deputy was kinda cute."
Will snorts, drumming her fingers on the steering wheel. "I don't want them to be able to expect us. We won't wait. Ariadne?"

"I'm fine," she says from the back, face lit with the blue glow of a tablet. Will has tasked her to read through all of the reports again, in case there was something both she and Beverly missed.

Reminded of her own task, Beverly resumes typing on her own laptop, perusing the files they have on the database. "You expect it to be that bad? I don't think it'll be that bad..."

"Oh, they won't be too bad in the beginning," Will shrugs, "even if we're women telling them what to do. But they won't like it when I tell them that they've missed more victims. Probably in their own city."

"...shit."

"Yep." Will blinks at the road before her, ignoring dark flashes of motion at the edges of her vision in favor of the glow her headlights are shedding. "Somehow he lures them, immobilizes them, has sex with them, and then kills them. How he does all of this, we don't know. You can't even call it sexual assault because there's no actual injury, just evidence of sexual activity, am I right?"

"Right," Beverly nods along, "but with every body, the evidence has been so destroyed that DNA sampling for semen is impossible. This one will be the same, with the amount of water exposure. It'll be inconclusive and a waste of time... but we'll do it anyway, because we're good like that."

"Whatever you can get will be helpful. Even though our victimology is solid, it'll be hard to pin this one down without a consistent cause of death. I'm pretty sure all of them were strangled, we just need to be able to prove it. Some of them don't have strangulation marks around the neck so strangulation was dismissed as a cause of death, and now too much time has passed for us to be able to examine the bodies. In any case, their deaths will give us a starting point. We'll find something there; we just need to look harder."

"I can do that," Beverly nods and gets to work.

In a half hour, Dallas approaches in the distance, sprawling suburbia lightening the southern horizon even a hundred miles away from downtown. The city sheds a dome-like glow, heralding civilization to whomever wanders in the peripheral darkness. They sit in silence for a while, Beverly humming and typing every now and then beside her, Ariadne reading in silence. Will does well ignoring the flickers in the shadows. She's going quite fast, since the roads are mostly empty, with a few construction crews disturbing the otherwise smooth drive. She contemplates the skyscrapers lit brightly in the shrinking distance. The one road will take them to the very heart of the city.

"How far down the state does this freeway go?" Will asks after a small while.

"I-35? All the way down to the border, I think."

"And it passes Dallas..."

"...Waco, Austin, San Antonio, ends in Laredo. According to Google Maps."

"Does it also lead to Houston and the Killing Fields?"

"Uh," Beverly types, "yes. It intersects with I-45 in Dallas."

"Can you access our database and pull any reports of bodies found with similar victimology from any town or city this interstate corridor runs through? Any and all reports."
Beverly looks up at her with dawning horror. "You're not thinking... oh fuck," she inhales, digging into the bag at her feet to turn the pocket wi-fi on. "Oh holy fuck. Will, this is gonna turn up a lot of bodies."

"I know."

"We'll need to call Jack."

"I know."

"But why," Ariadne asks quietly, "do you think he would spread out so far? Moving around in different environments is unusual for a serial killer."

"Unusual but not unheard of," Will points out. "Someone this careful and controlled about forensic evidence, someone who is smart enough to mask his kills by dumping the bodies in a place where other killers dump theirs... this one is the right combination of intelligent and brave." Will chews on her lip for a moment, her impression of this killer fracturing and morphing in her head. She is missing too many pieces. "If there are other bodies, I need to be where they were found. Though I don't have enough to go on, except a gut feeling that there's more."

There's another while of silence, just the sound of their tires on the uneven asphalt, until Ariadne's quiet voice pipes up again. "Agent Graham—"

"Will's fine."

"...Will," she continues rather awkwardly, "what's the protocol for sharing information to others about an ongoing case?"

Another strange question from this girl. Will sighs, "We're not supposed to because of media, but we do consult civilians if we require further expertise. Rarely, what with the breadth of the FBI's resources. Why?"

"My friend," Ariadne says, "the one I told you about, she's a medical doctor. I could ask her if there's a method of strangling someone without leaving marks. Or subduing them long enough to have intercourse without leaving marks, maybe a method of leaving them unconscious without harming them and without drugs."

"Oh, that's a good idea," Beverly agrees.

Will knows a doctor too, a good one, and Hannibal would know, wouldn't he? Except Will doesn't want to sully their friendship any more than she already has, and besides, he'll have come home from work and is probably already asleep. Disturbing him now would be rude.

So Will tells her, "Go ahead, but minimal details only, and make sure she understands this is strictly confidential, the violation of which is punishable by law."

"Okay," Ariadne pulls out her phone and texts away. "She should be awake right now, she's covering overnight."

Beverly grimaces. "Ew, overnight shifts."

"How is that different from what we're doing now?" Will wonders, maneuvering them steadily towards the burning lights at the heart of the city. The night is growing older. They are passing suburbs now, darkened neighborhoods asleep without any further thought to the dangers that threaten their peace. What complacence. The very thought is foreign to Will. She has never, in her
life, been so assured of her safety that she was capable of leaving the doors and windows unlocked.

Soon, they exit the freeway and coast along empty roads underneath the sparkling skyscrapers downtown. Will parks curbside outside the Dallas PD. There are three police cars with lit beacons, though their sirens aren't blaring. She spies several officers subduing three struggling men and dragging them inside.

"Busy night," Beverly notes. "Hope we won't be pushed aside."

"Not if I can help it," Will mutters, unbuckling her belt and stepping out. There are already officers eyeing them from the front doors. She catches Ariadne on the sidewalk. "Stick with me and don't speak of any details regarding the case unless I've already revealed it to them."

Ariadne nods. "Understood."

Beverly, for her part, looks at ease with a cat-like grin. "Watch and learn, baby duckling. Just 'cuz they're in uniform doesn't mean they're on our side."

Will nods to the officers standing outside as they walk in, Beverly beside her and Ariadne close behind. They pass the front lobby, where the three struggling men are being frog-marched through a set of reinforced doors, probably to be jailed overnight. The receptionist at the front desk, with her perfectly coiffed hair, looks up at them with a bemused smile. "Bit late for a business visit, ladies. What can I help you with?"

"We're here for the Lake Texoma case." Will raises her badge. The woman's expression sharpens.

"A moment, please."

Will hangs back, watching her phone perhaps the highest ranking officer currently on staff. After a short, terse conversation, the receptionist beckons a junior officer from the door. "Officer Brown here will take you to Lt. Ferrar; she'll be expecting you."

"Thanks," Beverly casually breezes along, a counterpoint to Will's grave nod. If Will were more optimistic, she'd peg this as the beginning of a great partnership. As it stands, however, her record with partners isn't too impressive. She doesn't want to jinx it.

Officer Brown takes them up two levels on the elevator and through quiet, darkened corridors hung with unobtrusive art. On either side are glass doors to soundproofed but visible offices, all empty and dark, with the names of their owners on bronze plaques. There's a small sitting area with some vending machines, a coffee corner, and a pair of chatting officers on break. A pair of double doors across from them shed bright light down the dimmed corridor. Officer Brown barely has them through the doors when a brusque, sharp-featured Latina officer marches up to them with intent.

"FBI?"

Will obligingly shows her badge again. "SSA Will Graham, profiler. This is Agent Katz, CSI, and my intern, Ms. Black."

"Well," Lt. Ferrar nods with a half-smirk, eyes lingering over them with what Will pegs as wary approval. "Good to see we girls are representing up there. Welcome to Dallas, ladies. I'm Lt. Angela Ferrar, currently heading the Special Investigations Unit. My boss, Deputy Chief Sherlan, warned me about you, but he didn't really tell me what you would need from us."

"Lie, Will spots, but she indulges the test. "We're here for the Lake Texoma case. We have good reason to suspect a serial, and since this one washed up in Oklahoma, our field office called it in. If
you need our clearance, I can direct you to my supervisor."

"So you do have a case." Lt. Ferrar shifts her weight, thinking. She's fishing, Will easily spots. She was told to find out what we know, if we come.

The small group of officers scattered around the room are mostly trying to not look interested, but failing. Will can feel the palpable attention directed at them. She decides to change her approach.

"To be honest with you, I'm hoping we don't, and that she's an isolated homicide," Will says, which is not entirely a lie. "But if I'm correct, the whole state has a problem. A very big one."

That is enough of a suggestion that it takes the lieutenant aback. Will easily sees the apprehension wash across her face, though it's well-hidden underneath her surprise and would have been missed by other people. *Maybe we do have an ally here.*

Will continues, "Bev and I just want to see the body. We won't take long."

"I don't have the clearance to allow you to run any tests," Lt. Ferrar hesitates, "and the ME's not done with the body yet." Will takes that to mean that the medical examiner hasn't even started. It was the right decision to come here early.

"We don't need to run tests. We just need to see the body."

"Superficial assessment only," Beverly assures her.

"Angela," warns one of the officers, "you heard what Sherlan said earlier."

"I did," Lt. Ferrar says sharply, turning around with a frown, "but if they do have a case and we end up obstructing them—"

"You don't know that."

"Precisely my point. If another body turns up—"

The officer throws up his hands. "All I'm saying is, Sherlan won't be best pleased."

Lt. Ferrar rolls her eyes and turns back to Will. "Look, I'm sure you understand that y'all are stepping on some toes here. My superior wanted to see you first and talk before sharing any case details. We thought y'all'd be in tomorrow morning. I didn't receive directives on how much information I'm allowed to share with you regarding the case. Technically, Oklahoma called y'all in, not us. You see where I'm coming from?"

Will sees perfectly, thank you very much. This is partly why she quit New Orleans PD: bureaucracy and power politics.

"This victim is the eighth," Will tells her, tone flat. "There may be more. We chose not to wait until tomorrow because tomorrow we'll be busy looking at the other cases. Time is of the essence. I'm only asking to see the body, and if there are clearance issues, as I said, I can direct you to my supervisor, who is willing to take a call this late at night because this concerns lives."

"Yeah, don't you think we know that?" one of the officers scoff, quietly but Will hears it nonetheless.

"The sooner we pin this down, the sooner we can give you a profile to close in on this killer," Will points out, voice sharpening. "If you haven't noticed, there are only three of us, and a whole squad of you. You'll be the ones doing the catching, we're just here to help point you in the right direction."
"The thing is, we didn't ask for your help." The officer — long-limbed, solidly built, buzzcut and a scar across the ridge of his nose — meets her glare for glare.

Will picks out his name from his uniform and scowls, "Look, Officer Royce—"

"Sergeant."

"Sergeant Royce," Will drawls, rolling her eyes, "I sure as hell ain't here because I wanna be, I could be home in my bed with my dogs, but my boss sent me here because he thinks your boss' head is so far up his ass that he'd rather let bodies pile up instead of asking for help. If it turns out bust and I have no case, you get the satisfaction of being right and I get to go home relieved. But if I do have a case, you will all be answering to national media and an inquiry as to why it had to get to eight bodies before we were called in."

"And by Oklahoma," Beverly adds, "on the first body they had."

"That a threat?" the sergeant sits up straighter, scowl darkening.

"Enough," Lt. Ferrar's voice cracks like a whip across the room, silencing everybody. "Royce, go check on Jameson. Agent Graham, come with me."

Will wastes no time following after Lt. Ferrar, who leads them out of the room with shoulders drawn tight. They descend the elevators again and debark at the first basement level, where the stark white walls of a crime lab shock Will's eyes into blinking. Lt. Ferrar unlocks the doors. "The body arrived from Oklahoma this afternoon, but the paperwork took a while to clear, so we held the body here until we had the green light. We were gonna move it in the morning to the ME's office."

Beverly's grimace is telling and perhaps echoed on Will's face. The FBI tolerates no delay in evidence processing when it comes to homicides. Jack runs his CSI units tightly. It's been long enough that Will has forgotten how slow the process can be on the ground level.

"Was there no concern of evidence degradation?"

"Um, not that I heard," Lt. Ferrar uncomfortably admits.

The look on Will's face has Beverly chortling, however. "We spoil you in Quantico, Will."

Lt. Ferrar heads for the few but state-of-the-art coolers they have for bodies being held, hand alighting on the knob of the one they're here for. She pauses and turns to them. "Superficial assessment only, and we can't move the body from this tray. Fifteen minutes."

Will looks at Beverly, who shrugs. "More than enough."

"Thank you," Will says. "Lt. Ferrar, if you get push back from your superior about this tomorrow, have him call my supervisor. His name is Jack Crawford, Quantico."

Lt. Ferrar just smiles. "Let me handle my boss, Agent Graham. You just do your thing."

She pulls the cooler open and locks the tray, leaving the body exposed. Will can immediately tell why Lt. Ferrar heads her unit by the way she looks compassionately but coolly at the girl's corpse. With a nod, she steps back, allowing Will and Beverly to approach. Beverly snaps her gloves on and flexes a hand.

"We've only got fifteen minutes; will I be in your way?" Beverly asks.
"No," Will says, eyes roving over the girl's face. Peaceful in repose. "No, do what you need to do."

Will stands there as Beverly efficiently processes as much as possible from a superficial assessment. The camera's flash is blinding, but Will doesn't so much as blink. She feels her breathing slow down and even out, eyes trained on the dead girl's swollen face, watching as her imagination, her gift, returns the dead girl to her original state, how she was before she died, beautiful with tan skin and a radiant smile, blue eyes, bluer than the sky. In front of Will, the dead girl sits up and brushes her braided hair over her shoulder, naked but unashamed.

"How did you die?" Will asks her.

The dead girl brings her own hands to her neck in a choke-hold, a loose and upside-down one, thumbs on either side of her airway and fingers curled around the back of her neck.

"Why did he pick you?"

The dead girl takes her thick braid and brings it to blue lips. She opens her mouth and bites on it. Her blue eyes are ringed with red, like aging blood.

Beverly snaps her glove off. "I'm done," she says. Will blinks, steps back.

The dead girl's body remains prostrate on the cooler tray, pale and blue at the edges, water-bloated. Red sediment from the lake shore cling to her blue fingernails, rendering them purple. Will observes her neck, where there are no marks, and notes her hair.

"Okay," Will says, inhaling. "I'm done too."

She means it in more ways than one. Her head is pounding with the silence. That's all she can hear from this dead girl: silence.

The moment they get to their car, Beverly catches her. "You look like you've seen a ghost. You're not allowed to drive. Gimme the keys."

Will hands them over and slides wordlessly into the passenger seat, buckling her belt with one hand and popping two aspirins with the other. She leans back and closes her eyes, wishing the headache would go away. Even the darkness throbs when she closes her eyes.

"Was I talking?" Will asks.

"Yes," Beverly answers quietly as they pull away from the police station.

"What did I say?"

"How did you die and why did he pick you."

"Oh."

"I think you scared the shit out of the lieutenant lady. And goddamn, you have sharp teeth! Eviscerated that asshole sergeant! I'm very impressed," Beverly grins. "But I hope you got something out of that body, because I really didn't."
"I did," Will confirms, "and I'll tell you as soon as this headache goes away. Ariadne, are you ok?"

"I'm fine," Ariadne says from behind her, with such calm assurance that sends Will suddenly aching for Hannibal's voice. "My friend responded while we were down there, do you want to hear now or later? She has a lot to say..."

"Gimme a moment. Why don't you help Bev find us a hotel?"

Will breathes and tunes them out, falling into a light doze as she pushes the dead girl aside and focuses on the melody Hannibal played for her last night. It helps, somewhat, but it's not enough. When Beverly shakes her shoulder, they're parked in front of a Hyatt House on the other side of downtown. Hauling their bags makes Will's head throb again. She lets Beverly handle the receptionist at the front desk. Beverly's smart enough to book all of them one room with three single beds, saving cost and ensuring that they're never alone. Will only feels slightly discomfited by the thought of other people sleeping in the same room. Her head is hurting badly enough that she doesn't care. She just wants a pillow.

The room's calm gloom takes an edge off her headache. She heads for the bed nearest to the door, Beverly taking the middle bed and leaving Ariadne the last one closest to the patio. Beverly kicks off her ankle boots and starts downloading images from her camera. Ariadne inspects the water heater set on a table, murmuring about tea. Will has dumped her bags and is unraveling her scarf when her phone rings.

Unthinking, she picks it up. "Graham."

"Hello, Will." She freezes. "Is this a bad time?"

"Uh, no, um, hold on," she bolts up and makes a beeline for the patio. Beverly follows her with curious eyes. She shuts the glass door behind her and stands outside, hip leaning against the iron banister, unmindful of the cold. "Hello."

"You sound very tired," Hannibal notes, concern plain in his voice. "Did I disturb you from your rest? We can talk tomorrow."

"No, no, I — I just have a bad headache and it's been a long day," Will blurts out before he hangs up out of concern for her well-being. But right now, it's his voice that she needs for her well-being. Already, her headache eases as the tension bleeds from her shoulders. "We just got to our hotel, actually."

"Just now? Quite late. It's past three."

"Past two here. And yes, well, Dallas PD wasn't at their most cooperative. Come morning, I will have pissed off some important people."

"We do so sometimes in the interest of those whom we are trying to serve," Hannibal tells her with the weight of experience behind his words, "in which case, we are entirely justified in our actions."

Will has to smile. His voice is so warm. If she closes her eyes, she can pretend that they're standing together in his study again, looking upon Da Vinci or discussing mythology. "A rebel. Didn't know you had it in you, Dr. Lecter. You of all people."

"Au contraire," he says, "I am only waiting for the day my director gives up on me. I have endured him much grief over the years we have worked together."

Chuckling, Will tugs her scarf up against the cold breeze. "Not sure that's something to be proud of."
"I haven't been fired yet," he points out.

"Cheeky. Don't ask for it."

A while of silence endures, during which Will tries to reconstruct the cast of Hannibal's face in the firelight.

He hums a low note. "Have you taken anything for your headache? I shan't hold you much longer. I just wanted to check if you were alright."

"Two aspirins," Will confesses, "and thank you. For calling." She swallows. "I wanted — I was going to call you."

"Do you need to talk?" he asks.

Will closes her eyes. She wants to tell him everything, all of it, the way the dead girl had shown her the answers, those bloodshot blue eyes haunting her still. She wants to ask him questions. But this isn't his job, and she won't let it impinge upon what they have any further. So she swallows the knot in her throat and says instead, "It's a hard case. I'm missing pieces. The people here, they're not making it easy."

"Perseverance and patience, though easier said than done, will get you through."

He always knows what to say. Will smiles. "I know. I'm plenty stubborn. I just need to rest."

"Then do so and let me not hold you any longer. Good night, Will. Sleep well, and be careful tomorrow. Please call me."

Will aches for a longer conversation but knows from the tone of his voice that he won't allow it. So she breathes a promise she would otherwise never be able. "I'll call you tomorrow night, if that's okay."

"I will expect you."

"G'night, Hannibal. Thank you again for calling." She grips the iron banister, wills herself to say the words. "I needed to hear your voice."

He hums again, the same low note, a note of pleasure and contentment. "And I you. Take ibuprofen for your headaches, instead of aspirin. Drink plenty of water, remember to eat, and don't have too much caffeine."

Chuckling, Will assents. "Yes, Mom." They say good night again, but neither of them hang up, dallying like a pair of lovestruck teenagers, until Will huffs and drops her face in her free hand. "This is ridiculous. I'm hanging up. Good night."

"Very well, if we must. Good night, Will."

"For real now."

"Indeed."

Will looks out at the distance, the stars invisible against the fierce glow of a sleeping metropolis. The cold wind buffets her hair.

"Are we hanging up anytime soon?"
Hannibal sighs. "I don't want to."

It takes them five more minutes of breathing together in silence before Will hears a faint voice in the background: Trauma level one, Bay 6. Dr. Lecter to Bay 6, please. The voice sounds calm, but if they're paging Hannibal by name—

He sighs again. "I suppose that's the end of my brief reprieve. Good night again, Will. Truly."

Will chuckles. "Go, Dr. Lecter. I can hear them crying out your name from Bay 6."

"They're more capable than that, surely."

A more annoyed voice from behind him: Dr. Lecter, Bay 6. Dr. Lecter, Bay 6, stat!

"I guess not?" Will laughs.

"Very well." Papers rustle as he gets up. "Tomorrow night, Will."

"Tomorrow night."

Will isn't sure who hangs up first, but she's sure neither of them wanted to. She stands there laughing to herself, but also shivering with the force of want that courses through her body. Never before has she wanted something so badly that she's willing to abandon a case for it. She wants to go home. She wants to see him.

Eventually, she convinces herself to step back inside. Ariadne has already washed and tucked in, blankets cocooning her but cellphone still lit within her hands. Beverly is stepping out of the bathroom freshly showered with a towel wrapped around her head.

"Willow Graham," and here it comes, the inquisition, "you have some talking to do!"

"Yeah, I got a little bit from the body earlier," Will tries.

"Oh no you don't," Beverly corners her as she starts taking her jacket off. Will turns her back and can't see Beverly's expression, but her imagination is potent enough to fill the gap.

She sighs. "Just a friend, Bev."


Will pulls sleep clothes and toiletries out of her small suitcase, contemplating the best way to handle this. If she wanted to, she could shut this down with a curt word or two — but is that what she wants? There is none of the true hesitation she feels when she is talking to Alana, no wariness that makes it difficult to confess things she would otherwise be able to tell a friend. Because Alana isn't a friend.

But maybe Beverly can be.

"He's a doctor," Will blurts out, surprising herself enough that her hands pause. "Lives in Baltimore. Handsome, yes. We've had just a few dinners."

Beverly gasps. "Ooooh. Ooooooohhh! Tell me more."

Will thinks about Hannibal and has to smile, thinks about how words are inadequate to describe the breadth of comfort and warmth he brings her with a simple word, a soft touch, a private smile. She
decides to repay the favor with an annoying response. "I don't know what else there is to say," Will smirks to herself, walking into the bathroom and closing the door on Beverly's indignant yelp.

A shower would do her headache wonders. A shower and then sleep. Tomorrow is another day. Under the hot spray, Will pushes away thoughts of braided blonde hair floating in red water. She thinks of Hannibal's face instead.

Morning dawns bright and unforgiving over Dallas. Will could have used an hour more of sleep, but the sound of the patio door opening wakes her up. She shakes the sensation of warm fur and heavy animal breathing around her as surely as she shoves the comforter from around her shoulders. Ariadne's bed is already made; Will can see part of her through the patio's glass door.

On cue, her phone rings. She picks it up and swipes without looking. "Jack."

"Will. Got a call from some hotshot in Dallas PD ten minutes ago, the guy was pissed. Sitrep."

Will rubs her face, sticking a leg out from underneath her comforters and nudging the snoring lump on the adjacent bed. It doesn't so much as budge. "Went to Oklahoma, saw where the body was left, but there wasn't much there. Came back to Dallas and went straight to DPD 'round midnight, they weren't very accommodating to say the least, but I managed to convince one of the lieutenants to show us the body. Their ME hadn't touched the body yet."

"Did you get anything? Tell me you did, because nothing pisses me off half as much as some self-important asshole trying to tell me what my place is before I've even had my morning coffee."

Will snorts. Fancy that. Jack doesn't like other alphas. "I got enough to start on, but we'll be here for a while." She nudges the lump with her foot again. "This is big, Jack. I don't know how big yet, but you should probably be here." At least to handle the DA's office.

"How many bodies?" Jack asks, because Jack is always about the numbers and statistics.

"Eight and counting. I had Beverly start on the database last night, but it was too late and we all needed rest." This time, Will kicks the lump with more force. It grunts. "Beverly's still asleep but we'll get started soon and I'll update you when I know more."

"Do that."

"Jack," Will catches him before he hangs up, "do I still have your full authority?"

"Of course, SSA Graham," he grunts at once and without hesitation. "Do what needs to be done. If they pitch a fit, send them to me. I'm sure I can pitch a bigger one."

I'm sure you can, Jack. It's you, after all. Will hangs up just as Beverly starts to groan awake.

"God Almighty, was that Jack? What fucking hour of the morning is it? Does he have no fucking respect for sleep? Fuck. Shit. Ugh."

A grin eases onto Will's face as she goes about her morning ablutions to the background of Beverly's foul mouth. Will had wondered, when she first met her, if Beverly's preternatural cheer ever extinguished. Now she knows.
The patio door opens and closes to a soft 'oh' from Ariadne. "Good morning," she quietly greets them, earning another grunt and a few choice curse words from Beverly. "I... suppose I'll wait until we've all had breakfast before I tell you what my friend said about the strangulation?"

"Mmph. Fucken' strangle the light outta the sun right n — izzat coffee?"

Will laughs softly, toweling her face dry. "Morning, Ariadne. Bev, just get out of the bed."

A grunt, a thud, and several sharp words in what Will assumes is Korean, Beverly's mother tongue. It takes some time and a whole cup of strong coffee before her erstwhile partner is functional enough to even start getting ready. When Beverly finally staggers towards the bathroom's general direction, Will is already dressed and Ariadne in the process of drying her hair.

Will gives a moment to take her in, this peculiar girl Jack has saddled her with. Dark brown hair waving and curling past her shoulders, fair skin, a small perfect nose to go with a long sloping jawline and high cheekbones. Ariadne is actually quite beautiful, in a sharp vulpine manner. But what she has in physical form is muted by the intimidating burn of intelligence in her grey eyes, the intense stillness of her calculating gaze. Such focus, it unnerves people, and Ariadne is yet too young to know how to blunt or hide it. Will gets the impression that Ariadne has very few friends.

"So," Will broaches the otherwise companionable silence, "why FBI?"

Ariadne looks up and blinks. "Pardon?"

"Why FBI?" Will asks again. "With your credentials — Cambridge, of all places — you could go anywhere, do any number of well-paying, better compensated jobs."

As Will predicted she would, Ariadne tilts her head birdlike and pins Will with sharp eyes. "Could I? It's actually quite difficult to get certain jobs because I'm from Cambridge. Plenty of places have already told me I'm 'overqualified,' whatever that's supposed to mean."

Will gives a hint of a smile. "So you applied for the FBI, where one can never be overqualified."

"Partially," Ariadne acquiesces. Will watches her fold her hands on her lap, prim as you please, and perfectly English. "I chose it because it gives me further insight into the extremes of the human psyche. I'm easily bored and require constant stimulation; teaching or psychiatry or even criminal law would never sit well with me."

Smile growing, Will remarks, "Your friend's words?"

"My friend Yuri," Ariadne nods. "We went to college in Cambridge together and then moved to Virginia for medical school."

"You went to medical school?" Will blinks.

"With her, yes. Two years, then I quit," she sighs, brushing her long hair over her shoulder. Will has to blink as the image of the dead girl momentarily superimposes over Ariadne. "It was never for me. It's a perfect fit for Yuri, however. She's very happy with what she does. I took a short break and then decided to forge ahead with a graduate degree, which is what brings me to you."

"Crim psych is quite a deviation from med school, though."

"But not from psychology, my undergraduate degree," Ariadne points out. "In fact, it's quite a logical progression."
"You want to be a profiler?"

There it is again, that birdlike tilt of her head. Thoughtfully, Ariadne says, "I don't know yet, but I suppose I'll find out with you."

"I suppose you will."

Beverly marches out of the bathroom halfway dressed, muttering about misplacing her shirt. Will eyes the large circular tattoo in between her shoulder blades and sitting just above her bra strap, a lotus mandala, intricate and finely done. Very fitting.

She turns back to Ariadne. "My undergrad is in Criminal Justice, with a concentration in Criminology. I have a graduate degree in Forensic Anthropology from your university." Ariadne's face lights up in surprise and ill-concealed delight. "In addition to that, five years on the force in New Orleans PD, three of those as Detective. Four years in the FBI now, one year as an Academy Instructor and three as a Special Agent."

"Now it's Supervisory Special Agent," Beverly grins, her cheer beginning to surface with a second cup of coffee.

Ignoring her, Will continues, "I'm telling you this to hasten the process of getting us comfortable with each other. Jack gave you to me for a reason; I expect to be very busy in the upcoming months and will need all the help I can get. You've been so quiet since yesterday, holding back when I can see you have things you want to ask... you're wary of this arrangement Alana has helped you secure, unsure if I'm worthy of being your instructor. Which is justified because you don't yet know me, but I need to be able to trust you and vice versa. The only way for me to achieve that level of respect from you is to show you what I can do."

Ariadne can only blink at her; perhaps that's the most Will has said to her since they met. She hesitates, but then forges on, "I am very... uncertain of Dr. Bloom's assessments. With many of them, I disagree. She was the one who recommended I be with you, though she never told me why."

Will lifts her eyes to meet Ariadne's, something that requires effort, and looks.

"...you're wary of other people, distrustful, a doubter by nature. Because people often disappoint you when you trust them. Betrayed by those who should have nurtured you. Shunned for your intelligence, and it took you a while before you could be proud of it again, but when you realized your mind was the one thing that would never leave you or betray you, you took it in your hands and molded it, gilded it, sharpened it until it became your weapon. Distance became your shield," Will inhales, pieces fitting together in her mind's eye. "You were placed in a school for special children when you were young. That, beyond everything else, destroyed what little desire you had to assimilate into society. Humans are strange to you. You were already so different from others, and that isolation, that separation from the rest — it didn't help. They thought it would, but they were wrong, weren't they? You left that boarding school with singular habits that marked you out from your peers — until you found one person, just the one, who can understand."

Will's chest aches, she aches, as the words tumble from her lips. This girl could have been her. This girl could have become her. How fortunate she is that she's found that one person. Does she know how fortunate she is, Will wonders? Because Will is still here, waiting, wondering, looking, hoping that it's Hannibal, but there's no way to be sure. No other way but time.

As a testament to her peculiarity and strength of mind, Ariadne isn't even the least bit offended or affected. Will appears more affected than she is. In fact, she instead says, "I'm sorry, Will. I seem to have upset you. But you are very astute! How can you tell all of this?"
"Because it's what I can do," Will exhales, looking away now, fixing her eyes at an indeterminate point on Ariadne's shoulder. "We're all on the spectrum one way or another; I'm just a little farther into it than most people are."

"The spectrum?" Ariadne echoes. "You mean autism?"

Will's shoulder stiffens. "Some people call it that, I suppose. Others call it my gift. Mirror neurons, an unfortunate abundance of them... it makes it difficult not to see."

Ariadne sits there, mouth slightly open in awe. "That's amazing."

Perhaps in an attempt to steer the mood, Beverly quips, "Ooh, me too! What do you see when you look at me?"

"An extraordinary amount of contradictions," Will says without missing a beat. "Healthy eating, but you drink a lot. Intense work out regimen, but you barely sleep. You hate having to fall asleep, but also hate being woken up."

"Hey, what can I say, gotta keep it interesting!"

Will gets up from her seat and pulls her jacket on, bags already packed though they have two more hours before noontime checkout. She tugs one end of Beverly's scarf out from the neck of her jacket and smiles. "Strength of character, born from a certainty of who you are and what you want out of life. Pragmatism, because it's what allowed you to survive this far. You want a dog but you keep putting off taking one home, instead ending up finding stupid men who are only good for a night or two. Luckily, you're too smart to keep them for any longer than that; they're not worth half of you anyway."

Beverly blinks, taken aback, but recoups quickly and grins. "Damn right they aren't. You know, it's hard to find the right one," she flips the tail end of her scarf behind her shoulder as they start walking out of the room. "It's a damn struggle. Most of them turn tail and run the moment they see you have brains above your tits. It sucks."

"Oh, I have heard of this phenomenon," Ariadne eagerly agrees. "My friend and I were told that apparently, all the good ones are already committed in a relationship, and if not, they're homosexual."

Beverly explodes in raucous laughter; Will shakes her head.

Ariadne stops. "Did I get it wrong?" she asks, which engenders even louder laughter.

"I like this one! Let's keep her!"

Will takes them both by the elbow and guides them towards food. "Semantics, that's all," she reassures Ariadne, who looks put-out and confused.

Beverly elbows Will, however, and grins, "You've got yourself one, though, and from the looks of it, a good one! A doctor, at that! Well, well, Willow Graham does hide some charm underneath those frumpy layers—"

"Frumpy?" Will scowls. "Who are you calling frumpy?"

"Did he treat you to a nice restaurant? Is he a good kisser? Do you have a picture?"

Perhaps she shouldn't have told Beverly about Hannibal after all. She's going to have to put up with this the whole day, and it's a four hour drive to Houston... Will sighs.
"Yuri says that it's very possible to strangle someone without leaving visible marks," Ariadne tells them as she dresses up her toast with small, dainty strokes of her butter knife. "It requires quite a bit of practice for the precision it requires, but if one applies sufficient pressure to the carotid sinus to trigger its reflex, one can induce a short, sudden hypotensive episode mimicking a vagal reaction, and if strong enough, it can cause a person to black out."

She puts her knife down, nibbles at the edge of her toast, and resumes, "Since it's a quick maneuver, more like a trigger point instead of a traditional choke hold, most of the bruising will occur internally. If done well, one can avoid leaving superficial marks." Freeing both hands, Ariadne raises them to her neck and flips her grasp upside down, thumbs on either side of her trachea, applying force so that the outline of the long vertical column is more visible, but pushing just with her thumbs.

Will almost drops her mug. It's the exact manner the dead girl held her own neck for Will.

"It could be how he's subduing them, keeping them unconscious long enough to have sex with them," Beverly agrees, in between bites of her breakfast burrito. "It could also be our cause of death. Hold it long enough on the carotid sinus and you cut off the largest supply of blood the brain has. The vertebral arteries won't be enough to sustain collateral flow for too long; once anaerobic respiration starts, it's a downward cascade. Neurons start withering. Lactic acid releases. They poison each other. Apoptosis. I've always loved that word. Pop! they go. One by one."

"And Zeller never ribs you about your hidden medical degree?" Will snorts. Beverly's list of capacities just keeps growing.

"Hey, I've gotta make myself marketable in the bureau, you know. What with the competition being the likes of you and Miss Cambridge over here."

Will may have plenty of disagreements with Jack, but she has never once denied Jack's propensity for finding people, both those who would make great investigators and those who were worth investigating. She knew there was a reason behind each member of Jack's teams being picked for their positions; she's just never seen them in action often enough to understand precisely why.

Beverly makes space for her laptop on the breakfast table and pulls up the database to give Will the list matching the search from last night. It's a long list. Will swallows and presses her lips together. This is not the first time she has handled a prolific serial killer, but years of experience will never inure her to the bone-deep chill she gets when following the tracks of such a lethal hunter. Whenever she does, it always feels like she's being hunted too. Perhaps because she gets too close to the victims, sinking into them in order to find who took their lives.

"I'd prefer an old-school white board," Beverly tells her, "but we'll have to make do with digital, since I'm assuming you'll want to move."

Will nods. "Check out's at 11?"

"Yep. You want me to pass this on to Jack?"

"Tell him it's only a preliminary list. We're visiting as many of those sites as we can. We have to make sure. I don't want to kick up a shit storm for something that's not real." But it's real, Will knows, because she scans over the young faces on the screen and sees the pattern. There's always a pattern. It's just a matter of finding it and figuring out why.
"Road trip!" Beverly cheers, typing a quick email before putting her laptop away.

Ariadne is already polishing her breakfast plate, picking off what few she's left of her assorted fruits. "I've always wanted to see more of the North American heartland," she muses, quite happily for someone about to go haring off across Texas after the shadow of an elusive serial killer. "Yuri and I once went to visit the Canadian Rockies. It was beautiful."

"Oh, honey," Beverly laughs, "better revise your expectations there. Ain't nothin' in Texas that'll be like the Rockies, I can tell you that. Flat land, more flat land, and flat lands."

"Have you been here before, then?"


But Will is thankful, because flat lands make their search marginally easier. Less trees, more low brush, more accessible terrain, faster movement. Less places to hide. Much less hide a body, especially in wide plains where people may live far apart but are also capable of seeing for miles and miles into the horizon. The elements are not as harsh here as the deserts spreading westward; decay will be slower. But if she were dumping a body, she'd want to accelerate decay as much as possible, and if she can't wander too far from this area, then she'd have to find—

"A body of water," she murmurs, unseeing eyes fixed at the window looking over the parking lot outside. "We can narrow the list down by the bodies found beside a body of water."

Beverly raises her eyebrows. "It's not exactly a coastline until we hit Houston, and that's three hours away, Will."

"Yes, but Beverly," Will turns to her with bright eyes, "this is lake country. And lakes are—"

"—better for hiding bodies than the sea, of course, fuck me," Beverly thumps her fist on the table and stands up. "Come on, girls, let's get going. It's half past nine. We've got a long road ahead of us."

They wrap up breakfast and troop back to their rooms. Will listens with half an ear as Beverly explains the preservative effects of saltwater versus the algae-ridden, stagnant nature of fresh water lakes and reservoirs. Ariadne trots along with plenty of questions, but Will is too distracted with visions of the dead girl, floating before them, beseeching, red eyes oozing blood that trickles down a pale, passive face. It sends a pang of sadness across Will's chest. There's an element of mourning, something that underlines the loss of something precious, yet not quite remorse.

But who's mourning: the victims, or the killer?

Beverly speeds along the interstate, southwards past Dallas and eventually easing out into suburbia again. Beside her, in the passenger seat, Will refines the database results. Adding another field to the search parameters gives her a yield of sixteen possible victims. Sixteen from the list we emailed you, she texts Jack, so far, at least.

The response is predictably quick. Will senses the grim alarm underlining his words. I'll be done here today and can fly out tonight. Keep me posted.

Briefly abandoning the computer, she pulls up a note-taking app on her phone and starts making a list, underlining the "new" victims she's just now adding to the case.
"Pull up your database," Will tells Ariadne, "and start looking up the names on this list. Since Beverly's driving, I want you to read through the forensic reports. In detail. Put your med school background to some use for us."

While Ariadne attends to that, Will fiddles with the search engine and notes down where each girl actually lived. Then she maps it against where their bodies were found. Her lips thin; she can feel herself getting closer.

She pulls photos of each girl from the database and puts them all side by side, a gruesome grid of photographs. "Blonde," Will mutters. "Blue-eyed. Long hair. Tall, slender build."

"So glad to be Asian," Beverly quips. "If it's something I could get killed for, I'd prefer it to be something I chose, instead of a genetic inevitability."

"They always like the blonde, blue-eyed ones," Will keeps muttering, low under her breath. "Sometimes I can almost start believing that nature made the trait recessive in order to spare people from the inconveniences of it. Better to be dark-haired like a majority of the world. Better to be ordinary. It sucks being singled out. It sucks being in danger simply because of who or what you are."

Hannibal would have something bracing to say in response to that. Will doesn't even try to resist the urge; she switches apps on her phone and texts him, her words crowding against each other on the screen in an effort to make it succinct. She fails, of course.

His response is quick and short: We always want what we cannot have.

Yes, Will thinks, and I want you.

She is still shamed by the wanton thought. She only barely helps the flush creeping up her neck. She wonders if he's busy right now. He doesn't say any more.

If Alana were here to hear her thoughts, Alana would ask her why. Why does she want Hannibal? Why does the thought shame her? Why can she not have what she wants so dearly? The first, Will knows the answer to. She wants the intimacy, the warmth, the peace and stability Hannibal provides. The second, she knows also. She is ashamed of the depth and extent her emotions now run. But the third...
She wrenches her thoughts away from Hannibal and back towards the dead girls. She has a case to solve. The sooner she solves it, the sooner she can see him.

It's torture.

How does one collect love, rage, sorrow, fear? Is there a method of trapping such intangible things? Can she stopper them in a glass bottle, compartmentalize, separate, isolate?

No. No, there isn't. Because they are not matter; they are \textit{beyond} matter. Fear and sorrow transcend the dead eyes from whence they reflect; rage transcends the invisible bruises underneath the skin. Above all, love transcends the limitations of time and matter. Will can still feel it, echoes of a long-buried feeling, even though all she has left to examine are empty patches of earth and grass, with eddies of water lapping up against a remote lake shore.

Each isolated location they visit, each tiny police station and each officer and each remaining family member, leaves impressions with Will. After two and a half days of it, she can barely close her eyes without seeing the lives of each girl unfold before her eyes, or at least their last moments: a flash of desperation, a cloying current of fear, overhead the blotching blue-black expanse of an empty sky, the intrusion of another body, deceptively gentle hands, fingers firmly wrapped around her neck.

With every girl and every remote scene, it's the same: she surfaces from suffocating, subsuming desperation and fear into a preternatural calm, her vision ending alight with the stars.

"If you are indeed in very remote areas away from large cities," Hannibal speaks into her ear, "then you should be underneath darker skies."

Will tilts her head back to look up at the vast expanse. "In more ways than one."

"Darkness is a complicated thing to quantify," Hannibal continues, as if she hadn't said a thing, "defined as it is by deficiency of light. There is one such contrived scale that rates the darkness of the sky: a class 9, in which the only pleasing views are the moon, the planets, and a few of the brightest star clusters, is what most inner cities have. A class 1 sky, on the other hand, is so dark that the Milky Way casts diffuse shadows on the ground."

"What class do you think we're seeing right now?" Will says.

"We are not under the same sky," Hannibal hums, "as your view is darker than mine. Most of Northern America and Europe lie under class 6 or 7 skies, where the Milky Way is undetectable and the sky is smudged by a vague, greyish-white hue. The East Coast skies are bright enough that I could wander outside, sit on a bench, open a newspaper, and read the headlines without artificial lighting to aid me."

"I will admit that I didn't really pay attention past your first sentence," Will confesses. "Somehow, your words make us seem farther away from each other than we are.\textit{ And perhaps we are,} she thinks, because she's convinced Hannibal inhabits a world entirely removed from everything she knows.

"Have I upset you? I regret that," Hannibal sighs. They are both quiet for a pause, during which Will hears Beverly's muffled voice through the closed glass door behind her. She sounds excited, perhaps explaining some forensic procedure to Ariadne, who is proving to be an eager and lightning-fast
When she closes her eyes to sleep that night, her head feels overfull and yet light, as if everything between the confines of her skull has been scooped out, leaving behind only darkness of the most absolute kind. A class 1 sky inside her head, within which Hannibal's voice reverberates.

Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark.

There it is again, the large animal beside and behind her, just outside the field of her vision. It breathes, steady and calm, waiting, watching.

I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward path has been lost.

Before her, it is so dark that her dream vision is given such a startling clarity. The undulating shadows sharpen into dark waters reflecting a starry sky above. The universe expands around her. At the edge of the water before her is a prone, pale body, naked and with her hair in a braid. The body doesn't move. Neither does Will.

Thence, Hannibal's voice whispers, we came forth to rebehold the stars.

Another shadow emerges from the dark edge of the water and approaches the girl's lifeless body. The shadow of a man, the man Will is chasing. The shadow sits at the edge of the water with the dead girl, pulling knees up to chest and tipping his head back to look up at the stars.

Will wakes up with a perplexing sense of complete serenity.
Chapter Summary

Hannibal follows Will to Houston. The case concludes violently.

Chapter Notes

❤ Quotes & inspiration taken from Stephanie Danler's book "Sweetbitter."
❤ You will notice parallels with the Budge arc in canon. This is certainly not a substitute for him. I'm reserving him for later, for greater things.
♫ Please take time to listen to the song that inspired this chapter, Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth" (original version) - it's an old jazz standard. However, the version more befitting this story is Max Richter's "On the Nature of Daylight" version from the movie Shutter Island starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The case builds up enough momentum that by the time Will presents her profile in Houston, it's been three and a half days since they left Dallas, and Jack has made it there with them. She confirms her victim count at sixteen, piecing together a profile that is not as clear as she'd like for it to be but strong enough to build a manhunt around. It'll have to make do.

"As almost always," Will tells the congregated group of law enforcement officials, "you are looking for a Caucasian male in his early thirties: old enough to have the sophistication to avoid you for nearly a decade."

That makes them all twitch. She suppresses a smile.

"Blue collar job, something with flexibility of schedule that would allow him time to kill and travel with the bodies. A trucker, a contract worker, something of that sort. He's remained off-grid all these years; even if we did have DNA evidence left to harvest from the bodies, which we don't, we wouldn't have found him. He won't have dental records or hospital visits for us to link to him. He can't afford it anyway. He would have grown up relatively poor, but not too poor that he missed out on basic education. No; this guy is smart enough to hide himself amongst us. When you're out there for him, keep in mind that he's likely blond and blue-eyed."

Someone scoffs from the back. "How in the world could you figure that?"

"Because his preference is for girls of blonde hair and blue eyes, girls who would have looked like his sister," Will answers smoothly, having expected the question. Her voice remains firm and level as she pins this naysayer with a piercing stare. "His sister is dead. He's killing them because they look like her. If she's blonde and blue-eyed, he likely is too; those are both recessive genetic traits. If it presented in one sibling, it's highly likely to present in the next one. At least, it's a larger likelihood than him being a brunet."

"What's his motive?" someone else asks. Alas, an intelligent question.
"His sister is dead, likely from cancer or some other sort of slow-progressing disease that would affect younger people. She was suffering; it affected him deeply enough that he carries the hurt inside, even after many years. Look for a man who had a sister — just the one sibling, no others to depend on — and a rough childhood. They are either orphans by circumstance or choice; they either had no parents from the beginning, or they left a troubled household to strike out on their own. Her loss severely damaged him. When he sees these girls, all he can think about is how his sister suffered. He seeks to end that suffering. Our perp is, for all intents and purposes, a mercy-killer."

Will pauses to run her eyes across the group. They are paying more attention now, captured by the story of someone capable of such brutality. Within every human being, there lies an urge to understand, to unravel a mystery, to discover something new. Everyone wants to know the face of the shadow they are all trying to hunt.

"He will seem normal. Moderately charming if you engage with him. But also somewhat avoidant, shy. He will respond when approached, just enough to blend in, but will never instigate conversation with a stranger. His comfort zone is the I-45 to I-35 corridor. The northernmost he's gone is the border of Texas and Oklahoma, as you all well know." Will hesitates before the next part, looking to Jack. Jack nods. Will inhales and says, "When you first meet him, you'll have a gut feeling. You'll feel uneasy talking to him, like something is off but you can't put your finger on it. You'll look over him and everything will look normal. He will never look into your eyes, unless you're a blonde, blue-eyed girl, in which case he will be the most charming Southern gentleman you'll ever meet. If you're any other type of woman, particularly an older woman, he will stutter when talking to you."

A hushed, incredulous murmur runs across the crowd. They find it difficult to believe the precise nature of her profile; they always do. No normal profiler would be able to provide the level of detail she provides, simply because her profiles are born from her singularity. It would take forever and a day to explain this to them, so she looks to Jack, who clears his throat to speak.

"SSA Graham's profile comes with the full endorsement of the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit. She's our best; take her word for it." Jack tacks a stern glare at the end, for added effect. The murmurs die down.

"My advise would be to heavily monitor the interstate corridor," Will resumes. "Place checks at the weighing stations, post officers at truck stops. Put out a warning across the state for blonde, blue-eyed girls to beware, do not fight, run. He's a strong fellow in his prime; there won't be any fighting happening. He will overpower them. He has done so sixteen times already. Advise girls to stay away from dark, isolated places. Thankfully, it's winter; not much traffic at the lakes. He strangles them and dump the bodies in or near a body of water—"

"Wait," someone says, "we ruled out strangulation, didn't we? Some of the initial eight girls didn't have any ligature marks or bruising around their necks."

"Carotid sinus pressure, when applied precisely and in such a manner," Beverly puts her hands around her neck, upside down and thumbs on either side of her trachea, "can mimic vagal stimulus and cause a brief blackout. Sustain the precise pressure and you can keep someone unconscious for an indefinite period of time; just give them breaks to allow the brain to perfuse with blood, just enough to keep them alive. Hold it for long enough and you can kill them. The pressure is precise and small enough that most of the bruising will occur internally. By the time we've gotten to the bodies, internal decay has damaged most of our evidence and we are unable to make certain."

"It's very merciful," Will quietly says, one hand coming up to rub at the opposite arm. "Very kind. A gentle way to die. It isn't suffocation, which induces panic; it just quickly puts you to sleep. It doesn't mutilate. It doesn't hurt." A blissful, absolute darkness, with the stars twinkling quietly from above.
Jack catches her silence quickly enough that it doesn't seem unnatural when he steps in. "Like SSA Graham said, body of water. Be aware of your lakes and ponds, rivers, that sort of thing. We'll be here continuing to refine our profile with you. Ask us all the questions you like, but I want those warnings out on the media. This killer doesn't seem to have a time span; he can kill at any time. We don't want there to be a 17th body; this killer's already one of the most prolific this state has ever known. Let's not give him a bigger count."

Will is a little too out of it to remember how Jack concludes the session. She feels herself blurring a little bit, sliding in and out of alertness. Quietly, she follows after Jack and Beverly, Ariadne trailing behind her, as they retreat into a small conference room Houston PD cleared out for them. She sinks into one of the chairs and rubs her face with her palms. All over she feels numb.

"It's too vague."

"I'll have to do," Jack grunts, pacing in front of the old school concept map Beverly and Ariadne have constructed on the room's white board. "Hopefully Zeller and Price will find something." They are currently in Dallas, having taken over the latest body retrieved from Oklahoma.

Beverly exchanges a glance with Will. They already know there'll be nothing there. It's a waste of time.

"Can you get anything else from this guy, Will? Anything at all?"

Will keeps her face in her hands, elbows braced on her knees to support the weight of her head and upper body. She says nothing. The fatigue of the last four days is tangling her thoughts. The clarity she had in her dreams seems just that, a dream. A figment of her imagination. When she opens her eyes, the dead girl stands in front of her, just behind Jack, red eyes peering over his broad shoulder. Accusing. Beseeching. Fingers twirling her blonde braid round and round. Round and round.

"I think Will should go back to the hotel and recoup," Beverly declares, brazen and challenging, even against Jack's authority. "This girl's barely slept two hours each night. She's barely functioning. She can't help us like this. Let's let her rest, Ariadne and I can work on the database, and Will can come back after she's had some shut-eye, yeah?"

Will doesn't see what passes between Jack and Beverly in the brief silence that follows, but Jack acquiesces with a quiet grunt. Beverly's hand descends on her shoulder, shaking her.

"Go on, Will. Back to the hotel with you. Go get some sleep."

Will goes, needing very little persuasion. She walks out of the police station in a daze. Though the hotel is but five blocks away, Will is unfit for driving at the moment, distracted as she is by apparitions and the vast darkness brimming with secrets within her head. Beverly has a police officer drop her off.

It's all within her head, that's the problem. If only she could telegraph her thoughts to another person. If only there was an easy way to show them. Words can only do so much. Words cannot show them how her image of this killer is almost entirely corporeal to her, a stranger with but his face left in the shadows. She's almost there. Just a few more pieces. Just one or two more clues.

The officer drops her off at the hotel. She almost forgets to thank him and pays such little attention to her surroundings that she fails to notice the person she passes by in the lobby until he grabs her arm.

"Will," the stranger says, and when she turns in surprise, it's not a stranger at all. Hannibal smiles down at her, a warm sight for sore eyes. "You didn't even hear me."
"Hannibal?" Will blinks. "You're here."

"I am."

Will blinks again. "I must be hallucinating again."

Hannibal smile levels out into a concerned expression. "You are not." He puts a hand on her forehead; his touch is warm, real, and grounding. "You are, however, exhausted. Come. I shall explain presently. First, let's get you rested."

She doesn't remember how she made it to this room, nor does she recognize it. She only remembers the warmth of Hannibal's voice, his hand on her arm, guiding her along. He must have taken her up to a room, saw how exhausted she was, and tucked her into bed. Blood burns underneath her skin, flush rising as she ducks underneath the comforter and briefly pats her body to make certain that she still has her clothes on. Disappointment is too mild a word to describe the gut-wrenching feeling she gets when she discovers that everything is still on her except her shoes. She almost slaps herself at the mere thought. Get a grip on yourself, Graham.

She sits up and swings her legs over the side of the bed. The curtains are drawn, but the bedside clock tells her it's well past nightfall. Her phone is on the bedside table, indicator light blinking. There are several texts from Beverly, all within the last fifteen minutes. Maybe the texts are what woke her up.

Where are you? Beverly asks.

Will texts back: I'm fine. Found a friend by accident. Having dinner. Any progress?

It takes a moment, but Beverly texts back. Jesus, Willow Graham, do not scare me like that. Ariadne and I came back and you were nowhere to be found!

Sorry, Will texts, jumping when the door opens.

"Ah, you're awake," Hannibal smiles, full frame silhouetted against the doorway. The light shining from behind him is like a halo. "Just in time for dinner. Will you join me?"

"Um," Will blinks, patting herself down hastily, "um, sure. I mean, sure. Of course. Give me a minute?"

Hannibal dips his head and closes the door behind him. As soon as he's gone, Will flicks on the bedside lamp and finds her shoes neatly arranged by the bed. She freshens up in the en suite. Her phone pings again while she's washing her face.

Well, Ariadne and I will be having Chinese takeout. There will be none left for you.

Will barely resists the urge to confess that Hannibal would not condone Chinese takeout tonight, not when he's here to feed her his culinary creations. Speaking of which, Will wonders, is this a suite with a goddamn kitchen?

Google Maps tells her she's still in the same downtown Marriott, except obviously nowhere near the ordinary room she shares with Beverly and Ariadne. This must be a VIP suite: she notes the spacious
bathroom, outfitted interior, sleek decor, king-sized bed, an en suite kitchen and living area she's about to see... *did Hannibal fly down here just for me?* Will scoffs at her incredulous reflection in the mirror. *Surely not.*

When she's tamed her hair to look presentable enough and reapplied enough color to liven her face, she walks out to find that indeed it is the presidential suite with a living area and kitchen, fully equipped for the conveniences of a special guest. The windows look out over the city, vast and bright, spreading outwards into the remote darkness.

"Will," Hannibal greets her once more, taking one of her hands and bringing it up to his lips before she can say or do anything to dissuade it. "I'm gratified to see you more rested. Do you feel better?"

Will nods, momentarily struck dumb, an effect that Hannibal tends to have on her.

"Good," he says with firm certainty. "Are you hungry?"

Will's stomach growls in response. She blushes. "Apparently, I am."

Hannibal smiles. "You've been asleep since shortly after noon. Your body needs sustenance. Come, I have prepared dinner for us. Dine with me tonight."

"Of course, Hannibal," she follows, recovering some of her brain function as he turns his gaze away. "Where else would I dine?"

"I imagine there are plenty of options for you," Hannibal says. "I am merely pleased to have your company tonight. I was wondering if we would even have the time to eat together once I got here, with as busy as you've been."

Hannibal pulls out a seat for her at the table, placing her at his right, as if they were at his home in Baltimore, alone together. Will keeps her hands on her lap as he serves the aperitif, responding only after she's taken her first bite.

"You didn't come all the way out here just for me, did you?" she asks, looking up at him unsure of what she wants him to say.

Hannibal smiles at her, eyes twinkling with the soft light of the chandelier above their heads. "Of course I did. You sounded exhausted last we talked. I was concerned."

Will wants to gape at him, but it would be rude. She stares down at her plate instead. "Concerned enough to fly halfway across the continent to... to cook for me and make sure I sleep." It sounds even more ludicrous when she says it out loud.

"Certainly, if that is what you need," Hannibal tells her, spearing a piece of shrimp with his fork. He doesn't take the bite just yet, however. "I came here to see if there was any way I could be of help at all to you, whatever form that help may take. Talking on the phone is one thing, but the corporeal presence of a friend is an entirely different comfort."

"What about work?" Will asks.

"I have the next three days off. I can spend them as I see fit."

Will should feel terrible about Hannibal spending it on her, out here where he has no business being, when he could be resting in his home. But all she feels is a deep relief and perhaps the slightest dash of thrill. She's *flattered*. Beyond belief.
So instead of questioning him any further, she dips her head in a nod and says, "Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it."

The satisfaction radiates from Hannibal with such strength Will can almost taste it. "You are always welcome, Will."

"I can smell the sea from here," Will says, tasting the air as she inhales deep. Hannibal's suite has a balcony, of course, where the two of them linger to enjoy a fine bottle of cru. "The salt taints the air. Can you smell it?"

Hannibal tilts his face towards the breeze. The city is not immediately beside the coast, but they are near enough. Will can just barely see strands of his hair lift from his forehead. He looks relaxed. He's enjoying himself. "Yes. A distinct aroma. Makes one's mouth water itself." He shifts against the balustrade and continues after a sip of wine, "It brings to mind certain colors, in fact."

Will closes her eyes. "Blues and greens, so many hues of it."

"Pink and grey," Hannibal says instead, which makes her look up at him. "Blocks of pink salt from the Himalayas. Grey clumps from Japan, matte and almost sinister-looking. Salting is one of the most nuanced enterprises in cooking, the food always wanting for more, and yet the tipping point is fatal. It is difficult, at times, to find the line between not enough and too much."

She blinks up at him, marveling at his face, absorbing his words, committing to memory the color of his eyes. Reddish in the half-dark, with a ring of hazel warmth. Food is so sacred to him that Will has to wonder if everything in his life is underlined by taste. Will wonders what memory of taste she brings him.

"That's where I am right now," Will confesses against her rational misgivings. "That's what I'm struggling with. The profile I have is not enough to catch the killer, and yet I fear that if I look deeper, I will see too much." She pauses, gathering her words around her. Her perception is clear again, having benefited from unbroken rest and a healthy meal. "Jack seems to think that there is no such thing. I am afraid that I'll grow to believe him and push myself one step too far."

"You can become them," he surmises.

"I will," she insists, "if I'm not careful. What Jack calls looking is different with my... singularity. Looking is equivalent to becoming. Because the only way to truly get to know these killers is to sink into their skin and spend time there."

Hannibal makes a soft sound in the back of his throat, entire breadth of attention engaged with Will's conversation. His whole body communicates it. His shoulders are squared towards Will, his feet the same, his posture open and easy, as if they were talking about something ordinary, mundane. Something safe.

"Do you remember the intern I told you about?" he prompts.

"Your favorite," Will nods, amused smile teasing at the corner of her lips.

"The very same," Hannibal agrees. "I was teaching her about wine the other day. I told her that the
only way to get to know a wine is to take a few hours with it, spend time with it. Tasting for mere
minutes is a farce. Once must transcend towards savoring it."

As if to demonstrate, he swirls the wine in his glass and takes a lungful of its aroma, his eyes falling
half-closed in pleasure. Will endeavors to copy him but knows he discerns dimensions far beyond
she can. A reversal of capacities, for a change. Will is the one who sees less.

"Time," Hannibal tells her, "is the currency we pay for knowledge. That is the only true way to learn
anything. Whatever it is you wish to learn, you live with. You let it change you. The marks left on
you are as inevitable as the gouges old rivers leave on the face of the earth. The scars tell the story of
what you came to know."

Will is transfixed, eyes locked with his, barely capable of blinking in the dark. Above them, the sky
is a smudged grey-black, a starless dome, a silken blanket.

"So yes, I believe you are correct." With his free hand, he reaches towards her and runs the back of
his forefinger against her cheek in the most tender of caresses. "Whenever these eyes of yours looks
deep, what you see changes you. It happens each time. I understand your hesitation, your fear.
Change is terrifying and unpredictable. But that is the only way you can learn about your killers, and
so you do it anyway. What a brave soul behind those beautiful eyes of yours."

"I don't know about bravery," Will tells him, unbidden, "because every single time I tremble in fear
of what I could become."

"Courage is not the absence of fear, dear Will, but conviction in the face of it."

Will has nothing to say to that. She often has nothing to say in the face of his overwhelming wisdom.
He takes her hand, ten fingers of heat closing around her cold ones, anchoring her firmly before she
can even dream of drifting away. They are quiet for a while. She closes her eyes, holds on to the
memory of this feeling. Warmth radiates from their point of contact. Against the bone cage of her
ribs, her heart thuds and stutters.

"Did you know that there are five basic tastes?" he says this as he brings her hand up to his lips again
for a brief kiss. What does he taste when he kisses her hand like so? He continues, "One of them is
bitterness. Perhaps my favorite."

"How so?" Will asks, voice a fragile rasp. It isn't the air, which is still warm this far south.

"Coffee, chocolate," Hannibal enumerates, "rosemary, citrus rinds, wine. Once, when we were still
wild, it warned us of deadly things. Poisons. Bitterness meant death. Always a bit unanticipated. It
embodies change. Even now, as modern man, the mouth still hesitates at each new encounter, doesn't
it? But we urge it forward. We say, Adapt. And eventually, we teach ourselves how to enjoy life's
poisons as its delicacies."

She twines his fingers around his, like vines of wine clinging to a wooden lattice in order to be
touched by the sun. "Do you believe I can learn how to enjoy the pain my insight brings with each
case?"

"I believe you can learn how to tolerate it without destabilizing yourself," Hannibal corrects her,
gently as ever. "With guidance. With an anchor."

Will smiles. "Are you offering to be that anchor?"

"Only if you return the favor."
"I find it hard to imagine anything that could unmoor you. I would be extraneous in your life. Unnecessary."

Hannibal’s fingers tighten around hers, a determined cast falling across his face. "Perhaps one theater wherein your imagination falls short against mine. You are both sorely needed and wanted, Will. And I will patiently wait for the day when you believe me in this, my beautiful rose."

Will ducks her head, as if his words were physical entities to avoid, flung at her as they were without warning. As such, she only sees the forward movement of Hannibal’s feet before she finds herself ensconced in an embrace. Such warmth. Such tenderness. Her breath rattles its way through her throat and chest, inhale, exhale, unsteadily against his breastbone. Hannibal is very solid.

Her free hand clutches at his shirt, gently at first but gradually gaining strength, until she is all but clinging to him. Her fingers, they tremble. Her wineglass crashes against the floor. She jumps but Hannibal steadies her, cupping the back of her head to cradle her against his chest. They stand there, locked in a static new dynamic. Will closes her eyes.

"Hannibal?"

"Yes."

Will untucks her head from underneath his chin, steels herself. Taste is a farce, Hannibal had said, but farce or not, she so desperately wants it, and in this moment she is weak.

So she tiptoes and lets her eyes fall halfway shut, touches her mouth to his, feeling him shift and tilt against her so that they will fit. His hand cradles the back of her head, tapered fingers tangling into her hair. Her eyes do shut when he presses their lips harder, firmer, more insistent, more visceral. He laps at her mouth once and draws away.

Before her courage leaves her, she asks, "What do I taste like, Hannibal?"

His lashes flutter, face darkening in pleasure, and when he speaks, his voice is softer, lower. "Sweet," he says, "like honey, but thicker. Molasses. Mouth-coating like milk." She flushes, pleased. He rests his thumb against her lips and tells her, "Sugar intoxicated us, when we were still wild. Like the first dose of a potent narcotic. We grew to crave it, languished without it." He dips his head and kisses her again, pecking this time, teasing, "But even after we've tamed and refined it, the juice from a fresh peach still runs us through like a flash flood."

He speaks the words with the weight of clairvoyance, seeing beyond what her eyes can see, into a future where they have grown together long enough to tame and name and refine this. He sees it; Will can barely even imagine it. For the first time in a very long time, her sight and imagination both fall short.

Of course Hannibal is too much a gentleman to take it any farther than that. He delivers Will to her door, where he claims for himself another short kiss, and then they part. Will slips into the room far past midnight, heart pounding and flush crawling across her skin. Thank heavens both Beverly and Ariadne are sound asleep.
In the morning, she wakes with a clarity she hasn't had since leaving Baltimore: crystal-like and sharp as ice. At 7:04am, Will swings out of bed and steals Beverly's laptop, firing up the database to refine the search even further.

"Wh'th'fuck even. Ugh. Will?"

Beverly sticks her head out from underneath her comforters when she hears Will type. Will says, "Lake Houston, Lake Conroe, Lake Livingston. Narrowing the search down to towns immediately beside or around them. Same parameters. He'll have a lakeside property, either rented or owned. Add to that a deceased sister. Blue-collar job. Caucasian. Thirties."

The loading icon turns and turns and then it stops. Will grabs her phone.

"Jack," she barks, not waiting for a greeting or response, "I have him. Tyler Platt, 37, works for a company that delivers goods back and forth between Dallas, Houston, and Austin. Last listed address 24507 Sunny Glen Dr just on the banks of Lake Houston — Jack, this is him, I have him."

"Good," Jack grimly tells her, "because he has another girl. He probably saw the warning on the news and it triggered him. There was a missing persons report filed last night, they almost trashed it because it hasn't been 24 hours, but one of the officers remembered your profile about the sister. Blonde, blue-eyed. It's been 6 hours since the report was filed, 13 since her disappearance."

Will falls deathly still. "No."

"Unfortunately, yes. We have to find him, and fast. We have less than 11 hours to save this girl. Get yourself up, Agent, meet me at his address, I'm taking a team there and sending out an APB."

"Got it."

"Oh, and Will? Good work."

She hangs up and vaults out of bed, dragging Beverly's comforter in the process. "Get up, we've identified our guy and he has another girl."

"Fuck my luck," Beverly cusses, staggering out of bed as Will stumbles through a sped-up morning routine. Ariadne is hopping into jeans already. Every minute counts.

"We have a problem," Ariadne suddenly says while in the midst of buttoning her shirt.

"What?"

"Beverly and I walked here from the station last night. The car's still parked over there."

"Fuck me!" Beverly shouts from inside the bathroom, through the noise of a flush. The door bursts open and she says, "We'll have to fucking walk back there, cabs don't seem to exist in this city! We do not need this shit right now. Fuck, why did we leave the car there last night!"

Will looks at her phone, thumb hovering over a name. She looks up at the other two, bites her lip, and takes the plunge. "I have an idea."
"I could take you there myself, instead of taking you to the station to fetch your car," Hannibal tells her when they meet up in the lobby downstairs. "It'll save you some time."

"I don't want to involve you," Will frowns.


"Later, Bev," Will scolds, the turns back to Hannibal. "It's best if we just go by ourselves."

Hannibal looks the very definition of patience. "I can take care of myself, Will."

"Hannibal, please."

"Oh, come on," Beverly pushes, "we're running late here. The guy's offering, just take it! It'll be fine, come on. He'll stay in the car, alright? Come on, let's go!"

Beverly heads for Hannibal's rented car before Will can mount another refusal. Twenty minutes later finds Will in the passenger seat, Beverly behind her directing Hannibal, and Ariadne quietly along for the ride. Ariadne looks as if she dearly wants to say something but is holding herself back by sheer force of will, or perhaps in respect of the gravity of the situation. Beverly, on the other hand, has no such qualms.

"Take a left here, stay in the middle lane," Beverly directs Hannibal. "You guys had dinner last night, didn't you?"

"Beverly."

"You so did," she smirks, poking Will's shoulder with a finger. "And you didn't come back until past midnight, I know."

Will can only sigh and send Hannibal an apologetic look. Hannibal, for his part, looks like he's still very much enjoying himself.

Beverly is relentless. "Are you from Baltimore? You don't seem like the Texan type. You must be Will's doctor friend, the one she's told me so much about. Oh, you're turning right at the stoplight, merge into the freeway."

"I have told you nothing, Beverly."

"Indeed, I am from Baltimore. I must admit I'm pleased to feature so prominently in Will's stories."

"Oh god," Will groans, putting her face in her hands.

"Totally, she gushes about you! So what are you a doctor of?"

"Emergency and trauma medicine, Johns Hopkins."

"Oooooh," Beverly grins, poking Will's shoulder again. "Fancy, Will Graham. Your tastes are fancy."

"Please stop," Will begs. Hannibal is chuckling now.

Beverly does the exact opposite. "So how did you two meet? —oh, yeah, take exit 54A."

"I found Will in a museum," Hannibal smiles. Beverly bursts with inappropriate laughter. "It was very serendipitous."
"A museum!" Beverly exclaims, hand clutching Will's shoulder hard. Will, for her part, can only look out through the window in despair. "Jesus, Graham! I knew you were bad, but I didn't know you were that bad!"

"Shut up, Bev."

"Nope!"

She does not stop, interrogating Hannibal about their "relationship" until they are almost at the destination. Will cannot find a plausible method of stopping her, not when she's on such a roll, and especially not when Hannibal is happily abetting the disaster. At least the intern is keeping to herself, Will snorts, watching Ariadne fidget on the rearview mirror. I'll take what little graces I can get out of life.

"We're almost there," Beverly suddenly says, and it's nowhere near soon enough. Will's itching to jump out of the car, away from Hannibal's palpable amusement and Beverly's obnoxious nattering.

Jack's teams have arrived ahead of them as expected, police cars swarming around the neighborhood, congregated around a little house by the lake shore. Will notes a hammock set up in the back to overlook the water and a dock against which a small boat is tied off. The backyard meanders into the water, a soft slow incline you would barely notice until you suddenly find your feet submerged in silt.

Sighting them, Jack comes away from the huddle of law enforcement personnel in front of the house. Will spares a glance at the curious neighbors poking their head over and around the yellow tape barricade. That they haven't been dispersed tells Will that their suspect is not here.

"Jack," Will greets, stepping out of the car followed by Beverly and Ariadne. Jack looks over her shoulder, surely eyeing Hannibal, whom he does not know. "This is a friend of mine who happened to be able to give us a quick ride."

Jack steps past her and up to Hannibal, who is closing the car door behind him and pocketing the keys. Will looks in surprise. She had expected no more questioning on that front.

"Jack Crawford, FBI." Jack offers his hand to shake, which Hannibal takes in stride. "I've seen you once before. Remind me."

"Hannibal Lecter, MD. Perhaps at a social event in Baltimore."

"Oh, yes," Jack nods readily, "you know Dr. Bloom, don't you? Alana Bloom?"

"Yes, we are acquainted," Hannibal agrees. Something about his response piques Will's attention; she puts it aside.

"Am I clear to go in there, Jack?" Will says, just barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes. All of this testosterone-driven posturing, it drives her up the wall.

Without waiting for a clear affirmative, she marches up to the house, Ariadne close at her heels. Beverly is already conferring with on-site personnel to verify what they've found. The whole house will soon be crawling with technicians. Will needs to get what she needs before them.

The living room is dull and bare, with but an echo of life in its walls. Once upon a time, this house was a warm, comfortable sanctuary. It's been a long time. Will brushes her fingers along the spines of books on an old shelf, the books themselves long unread, the dust coating her fingertips in a fine film. Her eyelids flutter, seeing wisps of blonde hair luminescent under sunlight and the brightest
edges of a wide smile. She can almost hear the laughter, the low murmur of words shared in a small intimate space. She can feel it. The love hasn't left this space.

On the walls and shelves are assorted pictures, framed lovingly and displayed for all to see. The face of their suspect with the same girl, blonde and blue-eyed, her hair almost always in a long braid. The braid is sometimes slung across her shoulder, and her smile is always effervescent. There are several shots on a boat and in what Will assumes is the backyard. There is one shot, in particular, of the both of them sitting side-by-side in the small hammock, mirroring each other's smiles.

*Is it so?* she murmurs into empty space, walking the halls of the house with her eyes wide open. Ghosts of a happy life dance around her: here in the kitchen cooking breakfast and making coffee, there in the bedroom holding each other in repose. The bedroom is a livid space where grief seethes, reverberating through her bones as she steps in. The walls are covered in pictures of her. Sparsed in between are pictures of the girls. Their victims. *Is it worth it?*

Will has company. The dead girl stands by the window, her back flush against the wall, purple fingers still coated in orange-red silt. She fiddles with the end of her long blonde braid, and in a bright flash she ceases to be their victim, instead becomes the nameless sister whose face inspired all the murders.

"Is it worth it?" Will asks her.

She points to a framed picture on the nightstand.

The little children in the picture look with grim eyes up at Will. They are shackled and unhappy, but at least they are together. In the picture, in that moment and forever, they hold each other's hands, their only anchor, their only guide, their only limit being the other.

What a bitter earth it has been to them, to give life to them and yet give them so little. What little they were given was each other, and even that was taken away. They had lived quiet lives with a simple happiness; that was torn away. They were torn apart. It was no one's fault. It was everyone's fault.

She was ill and he was helpless. What could he do? Perhaps if they had more money, the treatments could have prolonged her life. Perhaps, perhaps. We will never know.

Will turns to the sister, the dead girl, and asks one last time. "Why did he do it?"

The dead girl gives her a sad smile and tells her a secret.

Will has enough.

Outside, Jack waits with local police, expectantly turning to her the moment she steps off the front porch. "Anything?"

"She wasn't just his sister," Will declares. "She was his lover. They were in a romantic relationship, and then she died."

Spasms of disgust and disbelief ripple across the faces of those who heard her. Jack's face does nothing but harden. "Does that help you narrow our search?"

"He'll be close," Will says confidently. "This place is precious to him. He would never abandon it. He would rather die."
Police remain stationed in the area to keep the place secure, but Jack has decided that their efforts are best redirected elsewhere. They have orders to return downtown and go over the data again, attempt to flesh out the profile as much as they can to help narrow down the state-wide search. Without proof, getting cooperation from the locals was like pulling teeth, but now, with a target in sight, the Texans are like loosed bloodhounds baying for the kill. Will understands Jack's meaning. They need to be given more than shadows to snap at.

Hannibal is quiet when they get back into his rented car. Will knows she should be worried but is too distracted by the headache pounding underneath her temples, gradually building strength until it crashed like large waves against a cliff. Her skull is the cliff and the images are the water, pushing at her, always pushing at her, relentless and without pause. She doesn't realize that she's been clenching her fists in her lap until Hannibal reaches over and places a warm hand on top of them.

"Are you quite well, Will?"

Will cannot lie to him, so she has to tell the truth. "Headache. It happens."

"I should stop for gas before we return to the freeway," Hannibal notes. "I can purchase some painkillers for you at the station. Did we not pass one close by?"

"Just at the mouth of the street leaving the neighborhood," Ariadne supplies helpfully. She follows Will, as she is bound to do, whereas Beverly is left behind at the suspect's house to oversee evidence processing.

The small Exxon is at the intersection of a major road and a small inlet. Hannibal pulls the car up to one of the two pumps and steps out. Will follows suit, stepping out to lean against the hood of the car with her head tipped back. The colder air seems to help with the pain.

"I'll be right back," Hannibal tells her, leaving the pump running. Will watches him go inside the convenience store, with his polished leather shoes and tailored jacket and expensive watch. She has never seen a more disparate image. At least the store seems clean and the windows grime-free. She continues to watch him when he steps inside, heading straight for the counter where the lone attendant stands. There's only one other customer inside. It shouldn't take long.

Two squad cars, one Houston police and the other a Ranger vehicle, peel out of the smaller road into the larger one. Will's eyes track them as they speed away. Did someone find something new? Perhaps. Will can't summon much enthusiasm to apprehend this killer anymore. This is always the difficulty with her sight; it changes her perception, makes it difficult for her to follow a case through the end. Once she has empathized with a perpetrator, it will take significant incentive for her to pull the trigger. Even Abigail Hobbs hadn't been enough; she didn't pull the trigger until Abigail was on the floor practically dead.

The pump clicks behind her, calling attention. She replaces the nozzle and screws up the gas cap. A gunshot rings out behind her; she drops to the ground.

Heart pounding, she looks around her, trying to make certain that it wasn't just her imagination. But Ariadne has dropped below the glass inside the car, so no, no, it's not just in her head.

Instinct has her gun in her hand, cocked and muzzle downwards. She crouches and inches along the side of the car, peeking out around the station pump. There is no one else around but them, except for the people inside the store.
Hannibal is inside the store.

Will looks through the window and sees, *sees*. The attendant is nowhere to be found, presumably on the ground, shot. The only other customer in there is holding Hannibal at gunpoint.

There is a man in the store holding Hannibal at gunpoint.

Hannibal has his hands up, speaking words Will cannot hear. His mouth is moving, she can see that much. He's trying to calm the man. The man, armed with his gun, makes a wild motion with his arm, jerks the gun, jerking with it Will's heart.

Will sees this and rises, vision narrowing, breath slowing. Her hands are steadier than they've been in years. When the man threatens to move again, she shoots.

Glass is scattered on the shelves and the floor, glittering as they catch light. A puddle of blood spreading slowly around a man's body. Will steps over the corpse and kicks the gun away, thinking, *Hannibal, Hannibal, what have I done.*

"It was him," Hannibal says from by the store counter, "your wanted killer." He's crouched beside the attendant, who is unconscious with a gunshot wound to the torso. Hannibal is holding firm pressure on the wound with both hands; there is a growing puddle of blood. "I will need medical backup soon, or this individual will die. The bullet has unfortunately nicked a large artery; it's hard to tell which with the degree of bleeding. Please call for help."

"Ariadne's calling it," Will hears herself say as she sinks to a crouch beside Hannibal. "I thought—I thought you were—"

"I recognized him from your profile and texted you. I didn't want to leave the store in case he tried to run. He read the text over my shoulder; that, or he could tell that I was on to him. He tried to walk away with his merchandise without paying and the attendant grabbed him. That was when he pulled the gun."

She cannot quite loosen her grip on her gun, but she manages to unclench one hand to rest atop Hannibal's bloody ones. Unable to meet his eyes any longer, Will rests her forehead against his shoulder. "I feel like I have dragged you into my world."

Hannibal turns his head and puts his smiling lips to her temple. "On the contrary, I have clear memory of making it here all by myself."

"I'm sorry," Will tries.

"Don't be," he murmurs. Blood oozes beneath their fingers.

"Please don't leave me," Will tries again. "Please. Not now."

Hannibal shifts to kiss her forehead. He vows, "Not ever."
The medical backup arrives. In ten minutes, the place is swarming with personnel, police clearing the area and an emergency medical team rushing in to take Hannibal's place. Will stands aside, unwilling to leave without Hannibal, instead remaining to watch him sink into his element. He dictates a brief rundown to the medical team, all the while coordinating the securement of the gunshot wound. His hands are steady and confident as he creates an artificial tamponade, as he preliminarily examines the entry for tearing and bullet shrapnel, as he helps start a second IV.

Another twenty minutes and the ambulance is careening away, sirens blaring. Will feels numb. Hannibal guides her to an outdoor faucet where they wash their bloody hands. She puts her gun away and clicks the safety back on. Ariadne hovers two arm spans away, phone in hand, looking uncertain. In that moment, she looks so young that she reminds Will of those days as she spent on the streets as a beat cop.

"It's alright," Will reassures her. "All will be taken care of."

The words are foreign on her lips. They taste false. But didn't Hannibal just teach her that taste is a farce?

Soon, Jack will be here demanding answers. Beverly too, and the rest of the team. Will needs to get her head back on her shoulders. In the rush of adrenaline, her headache has gone away.

Hannibal takes her by the shoulders, and then takes her face in his warm, damp hands. "Are you alright, Will?" His hands smell of blood.

Will looks up at him, into his brown-red eyes, and sees. "Yes," she says, "now I am."

Will can grow to love bitterness if the bitter taste of bile from having taken another life means that Hannibal is still with her. Because now she knows the dead girl's secret, the reason behind all this madness and death.

In her head, an echo of the dead girl's voice whispers: What good is love that no one shares?

This bitter earth; well, what fruit it bears
What good is love that no one shares?
And if my life is like the dust
that hides the glow of a rose,
what good am I?
Heaven only knows...
Oh, this bitter earth, yes, it can be so cold
Today you're young, too soon you're old
But while a voice within me cries,
I'm sure someone may answer my call
And this bitter earth
may not be so bitter after all...

( Dinah Washington, "This Bitter Earth" )

Chapter End Notes

♫ Please take time to listen to the song that inspired this chapter, Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth" (original version) - it's an old jazz standard. However, the version more befitting this story is Max Richter's "On the Nature of Daylight" version from the movie Shutter Island starring Leonardo DiCaprio.
Chapter Summary

In which Hannibal and Will both get to show off their skill sets. Oh, and there's more kissing.

Chapter Notes

You know how a seasoned ficcer can read smut in a classroom with a stoneface and not bat an eye no matter how kinky it gets? But when you’re reading fluffy shit, you must be in a private space, otherwise someone will call the authorities on you and you'll be involuntarily committed into a psych ward? I warn you that this chapter has a scene where it is SO SMUT and yet SO FLUFF, you will DIE OF THE FEELS because Hannibal is totally WANKING and the whole scene is SAP. Because Hannibal is officially obsessed. There, you have been warned. Now go torture yourselves.

yose • よせ
— moves in a game of go that approach a stable territory, typically enlarging one's own territory while reducing the opponent's;
— usually not as large as opening plays or middlegame plays that affect the life and death of large clusters;
— typically occur in the endgame; however, there are times when large yose are advisable in the beginning of a game.

Will is only barely with them right now. Hannibal can tell by the glaze over her stark blue eyes. They are sitting side by side in Houston PD’s headquarters, surrounded by the controlled chaos of a successful hunt. The vindication of having eliminated their target is suffusing the whole department down to its tiniest fibers. A successful rescue of the captured girl further bolsters their elation, until every single one of them is vibrating like carelessly plucked violin strings, mere moments away from snapping.

In the midst of the chaos, Will Graham is a study in silence and stillness. She sits upright beside him, breathing even, palms turned up and relaxed in her lap. Once in a while she blinks and flickers; that is her only motion.

Just as well, Hannibal thinks. Even for someone so abnormally adapted to extreme mental stressors such as this, she needs time to put her forts back together, to flush out the vestiges of the intruder.
She will not be able to do a complete job of it here, of course; in fact, Hannibal is counting on her failure. She'll make it halfway and find herself unable to continue, and at that halfway point is where he'll be waiting to meet her.

"Would you like some tea, Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal looks up to find Will's intern, a mild-mannered young lady with quick dark eyes and a perfect RP accent (1), offering him a steaming cup.

"Thank you, that is very thoughtful of you." He takes the cup and watches the intern hand the other one to Will. Will, for her part, mechanically takes it but does not sip.

"I have always found it very therapeutic," the intern says, procuring her own cup from the table behind her and taking a seat across from them. "Then again," she continues, "I'm British, so I may perhaps be biased."

Hannibal has to smile. "No, you're quite right." He takes a sip and utters a soft sound of surprise. "Your own brew?"

"I brought some from home. I've grown too accustomed to it. Oh, there's milk and sugar, if you'd like some," she offers, having decorously given him black tea to allow him a chance to tailor it to his own taste. What a proper thing to do.

"This is quite fine. I prefer mine without any today." Hannibal gives her another kind smile, before returning to Will. "Will, drink your tea."

Mechanically, Will brings the tea to her mouth and sips.

"Dr. Lecter, if you'll excuse my boldness — am I right in assuming you're Yuriko's sponsor?"

Hannibal turns back to Will's intern, ah, yes, of course. He nods. "Yuriko's friend, Ari. Short for Ariadne Black. Well met, Ms. Black. What a small world we live in." He takes a closer look at her now, head tilted and interest piqued.

Ariadne's face brightens, her eyes coming alive as she leans a little forward. "Yuri has told me so much about you. Please call me Ariadne. Thank you for taking such good care of my dearest friend. I know she's a handful, but she's just very eager to learn."

Hannibal chuckles. "And what an astute student she makes. Mentoring her has been my pleasure as well, so your thanks are unnecessary but accepted nonetheless."

"Fate does like to play her games, does she not," Will says from beside him, coming alive to turn and meet Hannibal's eyes. "Your resident is friends with my intern. It's so serendipitous I'm almost convinced you planned it to be this way."

"Only further evidence we are meant to stay together, my dear." Hannibal takes her hand in his and squeezes.

"Just when I think the two of you couldn't get any more adorable, sweet baby Jesus," Beverly Katz spins into the small circle they have made, crashing into a seat beside Ariadne and stretching into a bone-cracking back bend. "If you come across anyone like yourself but still an eligible bachelor, please let me know, Dr. Lecter. I'm in desperate need of one."

Hannibal's lips quirk in amusement. "Should I meet my doppelganger, I shall keep you in mind, Ms. Katz."
“Oh, no, no, I don’t want you, I want someone like you! Like the Adele song! Cuz you’re too… straight for me.”

“I don’t know whether to be offended or not.”

"Be flattered. And just call me Bev," she flaps a hand at him, straightening back upright and looking into Will's face. "You okay, Will?"

"Yeah," Will responds, eyes still somewhat glazed but slowly coming to. "How's the girl?"

"Oh, fine as she can be," Beverly shrugs. "She'll recover. She seems like a fighter."

The ghost of another smile echoes across Will's face. "You would know."

"I would know," Beverly agrees with a toothy grin. She slaps a palm on her thigh. "But damn, girl! Didn't know you could shoot that well! Single shot to the head, through a glass window, at more than thirty paces away!"

"Aim was never my problem," Will says, fingers twitching around Hannibal's grip to tighten their hold. "Pulling the trigger was the problem."

"Well, you sure as hell didn't have that problem today."

"He was pointing a gun at Hannibal," Will frowns, steel hardening her tone.

Beverly merely holds up her hands. "Wasn't arguing. Just saying."

But something about the short discussion catches at Will. Hannibal watches as she disappears into herself again, revolving around a thought captivating enough that she chooses to abandon the outer world to chase after it. How he wishes they were at his home so that he may unravel the workings of her beautiful mind in comfort and privacy. As it stands, he must content himself with the solid grip of her hand.

Sensing that Will is removed from their conversation once more, Beverly turns to him. "Do you think she'll be okay?"

Hannibal can only smile. "We'll make sure she is, won't we."

"Yeah," Beverly nods, slapping her palm on her thigh again. "Yeah, we will."

Beside her, Ariadne sits and sips her tea, observing in that quiet manner of hers, all revelations held behind the dark depths of her eyes.

Hannibal delivers Will and the girls to their room that night, retiring to his own suite in quiet satisfaction. He could not have arranged it better. The whole ordeal, while unexpected, is a gift, a magnificent twist of fate designed to bind Will ever closer to him. He can feel the distance between them shrinking, her hesitations falling away in the wind. More than ever he is convinced that she is made for him, a perfect foil, a beautiful complement.

A partner.
What an alluring and perilous thought: a partner. Never in his wildest dreams did ever dare wish for one, never did he even consider the possibility of an equal. But the memory of her face, her eyes, her incandescent righteous rage when she stepped over that man's corpse to come to him — Hannibal has to catch himself against the bathroom counter, eyes fluttering, breath shuddering out of his lungs in the aftershocks of pure, desperate lust.

With less care than usual he strips away his clothes, discarding the blood-stained silk shirt and jacket. It will be near impossible to remove the blood without damaging the fabric now. He steps into his shower and washes the day away, gathering only the shining fragments of memory in his mind, preserving them in amber and stowing them safe in the vast halls of his mind palace.

A hall for Will. Just for Will, and it is only the beginning. No, not a hall; a garden. Tall trees, bare branches swaying in the breeze. Cold wintry air. Perhaps snow. Frost underneath his feet, crusted over dead leaves and around vines clinging to pillars, a fountain in the middle. When it becomes too similar to the winters of his childhood, he changes the atmosphere, dousing the cold winter with the warmth of a roaring fire crackling just indoors, its light casting golden shadows over the snow underfoot. And there she is, resplendent as she looks up at Hannibal with those eyes, asking him about the vagaries of taste, demanding that he never leave.

When Hannibal reaches for her, she smiles, drawing away and back into the warmth of the house, through the doors that lead into wide halls dedicated to his memories of her. He follows her inside, watching as she sits beside the fire and holds out a hand.

"Come and tell me, Hannibal. What do I taste like?"

*Life*, he mouths, water cascading over his face. *You taste like life, my dearest rose.*

Concluding the case keeps Will occupied at the headquarters for the entirety of the following day, allowing Hannibal some time to put his own affairs together. He books his return flight for tomorrow, adding another seat for Will. Beverly and Ariadne are to stay with the rest of the forensic team, but Jack Crawford is of the mind that Will should be ‘released’ after today. Hannibal makes several calls from the comfort of his suite: one to his lawyer, to apprise him of the situation in the unlikely case there is a need for legal representation; a second to his hired housekeeper, who confirms that she was able to access the house and complete her duties in his absence; and a third to Yuriko, the longest call of all three.

"I heard you met Ari-chan!" she exclaims, bordering on shrill. "Sensei, you must tell me everything, please, Ari-chan has told me her version but I want to hear yours!"

Truly she is like a child sometimes, overly excitable and with a sordid thirst for adventurous, morbid stories. "It shall make for a very long conversation, Reizei-kun, and you need to be in trauma conference in ten minutes."

"Ugh, trauma conference is boring without you, sensei, only you do the exciting cases," she whines.

"Nonetheless, your attendance is expected. I can tell you the story at a later time." The silence on the other side sounds unconvinced, so Hannibal adds, "There will be more to tell if you wait until I get back to Baltimore. I'm sure there will be further developments when I go to the police department this afternoon."
"Oh, fine," she sighs momentously, as if it behooves her so to grant him this favor. "Very well. If you must." And then, a new thought occurring to her, she adds, "Can I at least see a picture of sensei's lady love?"

Hannibal laughs. "If you want her to like you at all, you will cease calling her that post-haste." He can almost see her stick her tongue out in fine mimicry of a recalcitrant five-year-old. "Very well, you may look her up on the internet. Her name is Willow Graham. You should find a picture on the FBI's website."

Yuriko makes a high-pitched squeak of excitement. "Thanks, sensei! Have a good day! I'll go now!"

Sighing, Hannibal relinquishes his phone on the desk and turns back to his laptop. The news feeds are on fire. Every report is hailing the swift conclusion of the case and the instrumental help the FBI has been to the state force. In particular, they are hailing the FBI 'star profiler' who brought attention to the case in the first place, linking sixteen deaths roughly scattered over the last decade into one compelling narrative. It'll occupy the public for a while. Will's name is once more catapulted to the forefront of discussion, especially among certain circles. Hannibal can only imagine how displeased this must make her.

Having nothing else to occupy his time now that he has made his calls, Hannibal spends the rest of the morning digging even further. Will's full records are of course a matter of confidentiality, but TattleCrime has a basic profile on her that includes certain details Hannibal did not yet know.

**Willow Graham**

**Age:** 33

**Place of Birth:** Biloxi, MS

**Current Employment:**
- Supervisory Special Agent & Senior Profiler, FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit (2010-2013, 2014-present)
- Professor of Criminal Psychology, FBI Academy at Quantico (2013-present)

**Previous Employment(s):**
- Officer, New Orleans Police Department (2003)

**Credentials:**
- B.A. Criminal Justice with a concentration in Criminology (1999-2002) *summa cum laude* (Loyola University, New Orleans, LA)
- New Orleans PD Academy (2003)

Five years in the police force, a solid background in law and criminology, and yet she chooses a mastery in anthropology. Fascinating choice. Hannibal smiles and proceeds to read every article the internet has about Will, brushing aside the grating sensationalism (mostly TattleCrime's articles) for the tidbits of information he gets to mine. It seems Will is indeed quite the star even within the ranks of the FBI, with her case completion rate and uncanny ability to pin suspects down within several days of assuming lead on a case.

In one of the articles concerning the current case, an Iver Wilson from *Politico* writes:
FBI agent and profiler Will Graham is now on the receiving end of some well-deserved attention after successfully concluding these high volume cases, and for good reason. Only two other FBI profilers rival her record. Seasoned senior profiler Jason Gideon, handled by BAU Unit Chief Erin Strauss, often divides the nation's workload with Agent Graham, tackling cases along the Western half of the country. Recently retired senior profiler-turned-novelist David Rossi is another such rival. Prior to his retirement, Agent Rossi tackled cases on the East coast and was handled by Kade Prurnell, who has since left her post as BAU Unit Chief to move on to an inspector position in the employ of the Office of the Inspector General.

BAU Unit Chief Jack Crawford was promoted in 2008 to replace Prurnell, after which Agent Graham was hired to replace Agent Rossi in 2010. Crawford is Agent Graham's very territorial handler, and it is a well-known but often unspoken fact even within the FBI that he handpicked Agent Graham while she was still in university in order to fast-track his promotion to eventually become the Director of the BAU. However, Strauss holds seniority over him, and it remains to be seen whether a promotion will be plausible with significant changes coming to the structure of the BAU's teams.

Interesting. Hannibal opens two more tabs on his browser and looks up the other profilers mentioned.

Jason Gideon turns up a very long list of concluded cases, as well as pictures and a brief profile (also from TattleCrime). He is significantly older than Will and closer to Hannibal's age, which must make Will extraordinary indeed to match up against such an accomplished agent. When he tries a deeper probe, he finds it difficult to dredge even small details about the man's personal life, perhaps indicating a carefully protected privacy. Hannibal can respect that.

David Rossi, on the other hand, is quite a popular fellow, with full profiles from multiple websites and a likewise impressive list of concluded cases. He also has three published novels, which amuses Hannibal to no end. A storyteller who knows how to play the game and is therefore very good at finding his fellow liars.

These are the people who are hunting me, Hannibal muses to himself. These are the hounds chasing after my shadow.

Never, in the past, has he looked into the inner workings of the FBI, despite their proximity. He has never needed to. Up until Will, he has been confident enough that they will not catch him; he is too careful, and they are too unimaginative.

But perhaps, with Will, he wonders... and has to stop himself. Such perilous thoughts she brings out from within him. He mustn't be careless now. If he wants to keep her (and he does), then he must watch his steps. No doubt the other two — Jason Gideon and David Rossi — have been paying attention to each of his kills, waiting, just waiting for that one clue that will lead them to him. Will is going to be his best defense.

Suddenly, the stakes have changed. Hannibal no longer merely wants her; no, Hannibal needs her, for many reasons plus this one. And Hannibal has never been one to deny himself his needs.

They land in Dulles on a chilled afternoon, Will hunching her shoulders against the wind when they
step out. Hannibal drapes his scarf around her neck, startling her. Such bright blue eyes she has. He merely gives her a small smile and puts a hand on her back, directing her to the place where he parked his car.

It seems Lady Fortune still smiles upon him today; Hannibal is afforded the opportunity to drive Will home. She lives close to Dulles, just outside of Reston, in a densely wooded, secluded community of farmsteads and old colonial houses. Hers is one of them, hidden away behind thick groves of oak, with a barely visible gravel path leading up to it from the main road.

"It's not much," she mumbles, "but it's home."

"On the contrary, I appreciate the isolation," Hannibal assures her. They unload her baggage and carry it up to the house.

On the porch, Will suddenly turns to him, eyes trembling and cheeks burning. "W-Would you like to come inside for a while? I can put on some coffee. It won't be anything like yours, but it'll warm you up."

Hannibal clamps down on the temptation. It isn't the best time to intrude upon Will's sanctuary; there will be other times. It is wisest to wait, he reminds himself. He's in this for the long haul. He can wait.

"Perhaps another time, my dear," he tells her, savouring the flash of disappointment in her face. He allows himself to touch her cheek, a consolation with which to assuage himself. "You need rest and the company of your dogs, a chance to process all that has happened without distraction."

Perhaps thinking she has done something to drive him away, she visibly flounders and takes his hand. "You're always a welcome distraction, you must know that."

Hannibal graces her with a smile. He does know.

"I'll be working the rest of the week," Hannibal tells her, "but I will call you. You will let me know if there is anything you require. Are you expected back at Quantico soon?"

Will frowns. "I probably won't come in tomorrow, but I do have a seminar on Friday."

"Plenty of time to recuperate," he approves. "I'll take my leave shortly, but if you'll permit me one thing."

"Sure," she smiles, a small and subtle uplift of her lips, and Hannibal swiftly leans in, tipping her chin with one hand to angle her face for a kiss.

He feels the tremor that runs her through, the shuddering way her eyelashes flutter shut. She turns and leans into him, hands grasping at his shoulder, at his side, seeking like a sunflower turning to the sun. Hannibal winds an arm around her back, pulling her flush against his body just as a gust of cold wind blows past. They pay it no mind. They are bright stripes of heat against each other where their skins touch, and when Will gasps, Hannibal licks into her mouth, another taste, another indulgence. She hums, a sound of pleasure; he takes it and preserves it in memory.

When they part, it is too soon. Will makes an impatient sound, still seeking, mouth parted and lips moist, eyes closed. Hannibal preserves this too, a reminder of things worth waiting for. When he finally has her, he will have her wholly and thoroughly such that there will be no cleaving them apart. He swipes a thumb on her lower lip and smiles at the thought.

One more kiss, they share one more kiss before Hannibal reluctantly steps away. Will's hands catch
at his arms and his coat; she visibly strains toward him but prevents herself from clinging all the same.

"I'll call you," Hannibal says again.

She nods, fingers now knotting into the hem of her sweater. "Drive safely. Let me know when you get home."

Hannibal cannot help but smile. "As you wish. Goodbye for now, mylimasis. Rest well."

On the long drive back to Baltimore, Hannibal touches his lips, all but absent to his current task. There is a melody forming in his head. The first thing he will do once he is home is play it, and then transcribe it, and mayhap on a night Will comes over for dinner, he will give it to her, because she deserves all the gifts he can give. (2)

At work the following day, he is distracted. He knows by the looks the nurses give him, the way Yuriko sports that catty smile of hers throughout the shift. It is a new sensation for him, but he approaches it with open-eyed curiosity, for all new discoveries in life deserve close attention, especially if these discoveries involve anyone like Will. She is singular, this he has come to acknowledge. And he, Hannibal Lecter, is obsessed.

"Sensei. If you keep staring at the pupillometer like that, it'll spontaneously combust."

Hannibal blinks and turns to Yuriko, who is rapidly typing a note on a patient's chart but obviously using only a fourth of her brain. "I have not applied fuel to it," he says.

"Your glare is the fuel; atmospheric oxygen is the oxidant; ergo, combustion. I looked up Miss Graham yesterday!" She finishes typing with a flourish, clicks 'Save,' and spins her chair around to grin at him. The mischievous light in her eyes is telling; Hannibal only indulges her because of his admittedly buoyant mood. Yuriko continues, "She sounds like an impressive lady. Very smart. Her brain is definitely your type."

"I have a type, do I."

"I picture you as someone who wouldn't settle for an airhead at the very least," Yuriko shrugs, swinging her chair side to side like a child. "They don't necessarily have to be very pretty — though Miss Graham is — but pleasant-looking enough at least. You value aesthetic only slightly less than intelligence. The brain takes priority."

Remarkable child, Yuriko. Hannibal smiles, approving of her perception. Since he says nothing to quell her, she forges on.

"But plenty of people are intelligent, and yet they wouldn't make your cut because they're not interesting enough. Miss Graham sounds very interesting. I've only read articles and yet I can tell."

"I hope you didn't read TattleCrime."

"I read TattleCrime!" she grins. "I asked Ari about it too and she says the details are accurate, for the most part, if a tad sensationalist."
"Your friend is also a remarkable mind in her own right," Hannibal tells her, to which Yuriko beams. 

"Isn't she?! Oh, sensei, you wouldn't believe how boring Cambridge was until I met her." Nearby, one of her fellow residents snorts. Only Yuriko, of course, would dare describe Cambridge as boring. Her phone pings on the table; she jolts and spins around, gathering her papers together. "Oh, I'm all done, by the way! If you would co-sign my notes, please! And then I have that patient whose family wants you to see them..."

Hannibal straightens and fires up the computer beside him, logging in to check her notes over. He is quite confident that they will be impeccable; nonetheless, his signature is required. As soon as he finishes, they log out and leave the station to find room 31, where there is a patient whose family is demanding that the attending physician examine them, instead of doing as most families do and surrendering care to the first person they see in a white coat. Hannibal braces himself for a potential conflict; perhaps there is a legitimate complaint.

"What was your impression of the patient when you saw him?" Hannibal asks her.

"Well enough," Yuriko shrugs, "if a little confused-looking. Didn't get to ask any questions or do any assessments. Family was very insistent to see you. Practically chased me out of the room once they figured out I wasn't the attending. Apparently they were discharged from another hospital several days ago. The doc over there dismissed their case, but the family's convinced something is wrong."

"What does your gut tell you?"

Yuriko looks up at him, a tad surprised. "My gut, sensei? You don't usually tell me to rely on it. Rashikunai na." (3)

Hannibal thinks on that for a moment. A memory of Will's eyes flashes across his mind. "I suppose this past weekend has reminded me of the merit in subconscious intuition. I do not make a habit of teaching students and residents to rely on it, because you simply do not have the breadth of experience necessary to hone a sharp intuition. But you will one day. It is one of the greatest paradoxes in modern medicine. We validate our methods with scientifically acquired knowledge, and yet half of our assessments are intuitive in ways we cannot even begin to explain. After you," he says, holding room 31’s door open for her.

Inside, the family immediately rises to their feet, a woman and two men, all anxious-looking and perhaps a little aggressive with their posture. Hannibal projects his authority and they visibly relax. The patient on the bed seems oblivious to the whole ordeal.

"Good morning," Hannibal greets them, offering handshakes, "Dr. Lecter, attending physician. How do you do?"

The woman sags in relief. "That means you're the head doctor, right? Oh, thank God. The last hospital wouldn't let us see the senior doctor, they just dismissed us after the younger doctor said there was nothing wrong with Dad. I'm Paula Jenkins; this is my husband and my brother. We brought our Dad over here because we know something's wrong with him, we just don't know what."

Hannibal murmurs all the appropriate greetings and expresses his dismay at the treatment they received from the other hospital. Yuriko stands behind him as he begins his assessment.

When he speaks to the patient, a Mr. Garner, Hannibal notes that his eyes are the same shade of blue as Will's eyes. Hannibal introduces himself; Mr. Garner responds with a mild How do you do?,
diction precise and tone patrician. Hannibal tells Mr. Garner that he is the senior physician in the ER, and Mr. Garner seems to look him over before saying, "Oh, yes, how good of you to stop by, thank you." Everything seems to be in order; the daughter, Paula Jenkins, attempts to slide into Hannibal's line of sight, perhaps to say something.

"Please allow me to complete my assessment, Ms. Jenkins." Hannibal cuts her short before she can even speak. "An impartial assessment is vital in order for me to be able to correctly identify what is ailing your father."

Paula Jenkins looks off-put and chastised, but she subsides into silence after exchanging looks with her brother and husband.

Hannibal remembers how Jack had the killer's house in Houston cleared out before Will stepped inside: an impartial assessment of the crime scene, free of other minds cluttering her soundspace... he checks himself and refocuses on Mr. Warner. Perhaps I should call Will after this and allow myself to hear her voice, so that I will be less distracted.

Mr. Garner appears to be looking not at Hannibal but over his shoulder somewhere. "How are you feeling?" Hannibal asks, watching to see if Mr. Garner will refocus his gaze. Hannibal is standing to the right but Mr. Garner's eyes drift left and now Hannibal is unsure whether the patient sees him at all. He repeats his question and Mr. Warner says, "Oh yes, thanks very much, how kind of you to ask," as if addressing someone else in the room.

Hannibal proceeds to ask the routine questions and discovers that Mr. Garner thinks he isn't in the hospital at all (Oh, no, I never go to hospitals, what dreary places they are), he's with his wife visiting a friend in the city (Today is Saturday, of course, what an odd question), it's 1984 and Reagan is still the president.

"Was he this confused when you brought him to the other hospital?" he asks the daughter.

"He was," the daughter says, "but it resolved while we were there and then they dismissed us. That was two days ago. Now it's happening again, and it's worse. At least he knew who we were the first time. And that our mother died ten years ago."

"The porous nature of memory," Hannibal murmurs, turning back to the patient. Questions are useless now that they have established the patient's confusion. No answer will be trustworthy. He has to rely on a detailed physical assessment.

A fever. Hannibal doesn't need a thermometer to check, because Mr. Garner is very warm to the touch. Beads of sweat on the forehead, damp hospital gown. Pulse strong, regular, but fast, galloping along at 123 beats per minute. Breathing seems normal and regular but when he counts for a full minute, the patient is just barely tachypneic, twenty-two breaths per second. An infectious process somewhere, he thinks, filing the observation aside.

Hannibal continues to assess, top to bottom, and doesn't find much. Yuriko is correct; apart from the mild fever, the patient seems healthy enough. No enlarged lymph glands in the neck, armpits, or groin. His heart does have a murmur, a whooshing sound in between heartbeats that tells Hannibal the aortic valve is a little stiff. But plenty of "normal" seventy-something-year-olds have ailing hearts too, so he doesn't make too much of it yet. Something catches at him about the way one of Mr. Garner's legs sticks out from underneath the sheets at an odd, supinated angle... something about those sheets too, rumpled and untucked, indicating a restlessness now absent in Mr. Garner's still pose.

Onward, Hannibal moves into a neurological exam. He turns to Yuriko and says, "Such an exam
may seem superfluous in a patient who has had a normal CT of the head two hours ago, but those machines cannot tell you everything. Never skip this part."

"Hai, sensei," she murmurs, quiet and watchful.

The exam isn't easily done with Mr. Garner, whose verbal facility is intact (Yes, yes, I can see it, your wristwatch, and it's quite an expensive one...) but whose attention quickly wanders, drifting off but not to sleep. Simply elsewhere. Mr. Garner is hyperalert but is listening to something or someone else who isn't Hannibal. Again, Hannibal is reminded of his dear Will in her fugue state and has to force himself to refocus. *I will call Will later.*

Mr. Garner's cranial nerves function well. Arms and legs move with normal strength and coordination. His reflexes are normal and symmetrical. Apart from his apparent total disorientation, Mr. Garner displays no focal neurological deficit, his whole assessment only telling Hannibal that there is an infection somewhere in the body.

Except for one thing.

Hannibal scratches the bottom of Mr. Garner's foot with his thumbnail, dragging up the lateral side of the sole from the heel to the big toe. The right foot reacts normally, toes flexing downward, but the left foot's toes spread apart and flex up to the patient's face, a positive Babinski's reflex, the first abnormal in his whole systemic assessment. Yuriko makes a soft sound behind him.

He repeats the test several times, with a pen and then with the sharp, pointed end of his reflex hammer. The result is the same.

One upgoing toe. It seems such a trivial thing, but Hannibal imagines Will draws out the faces of obscure killers from similarly trivial things as well. He repeats certain parts of the neuro exam, paying closer attention this time, and narrows his eyes as Mr. Garner's wrist pronates ever so slightly downward, the sign of a very subtle weakness in the limb.

Just one more test. He comes close to Mr. Garner and puts them face to face, telling Mr. Garner to look him in the eyes. Once they have eye contact, Hannibal makes a move as if to smack Mr. Garner on the left side of his head, stopping just short of hitting him. But Mr. Garner doesn't even blink. When Hannibal does the same thing on the right, Mr. Garner flinches appropriately, pulling back to protect himself as he should.

"Of course," Yuriko murmurs behind him, "he's not distracted; he's blind on his left side and he doesn't know it!"

The daughter gasps. "What?"

Hannibal turns back to them, tucking his tools away in his pockets. The information he has is enough to give them this much: "As Dr. Reizei says, your father has what appears to be complete blindness on his left visual field, something he remains unaware of, which is why he was turning his head more to face to the left side. He's using what remains of his right visual field to see more of what's in front of him. In addition, he is significantly disoriented — it could be from the low-grade fever he is running. Infectious processes often lead to confusion in older people. However."

Paula Jenkins closes her mouth once more at Hanibal's quelling glance. She had wanted to say something, perhaps thinking that Hannibal would dismiss them like the other hospital did, but Hannibal is not yet done, and he does not tolerate rudeness even with his patients and their families.

"There is an abnormality in his reflexes and a very mild motor weakness on his left side. Add that to
the visual loss and I can draw two possible scenarios, both of which will require him to be admitted." The daughter says; Hannibal gentles his tone. "The weakness, abnormal reflexes, and visual loss can only be due to some form of lesion or infarct in his brain. To cause such a variety of symptoms, it has to be a large one on the right cerebral hemisphere. Unlikely, considering how intact his other functions are."

"So what's the other scenario?"

"He likely has two smaller separate lesions or infarcts in his brain, one on the right frontal lobe responsible for his reflexes and motor function, and another on the right occipital lobe to correspond with his vision."

The daughter appears overcome and remains wordless. Confused, Mr. Garner's son cuts in, "But you said he had a normal CT scan. How can you diagnose him with — with brain lesions when his CT scan didn't show anything?"

"If you'll let me finish," Hannibal continues softly, "there is still the matter of his fever to discuss." The son's face contorts in indignation; Hannibal holds his hand up to quell them. "There is a point to this, please listen. The lesions I speak of are likely not of the cancerous sort, so there is no need for despair just yet. Mr. Garner is currently having a stroke, which is in its acute phase and as such will not be spotted by a CT scan. An MRI of the brain, however, will be able to, and that is what we will do next. Additionally, the kind of stroke he is having precludes us from being able to give him the medicine we would usually give to other stroke patients. We usually give a powerful blood-thinner that will dissolve the clot, but we cannot with your father."

"Why not?" the daughter demands, distraught.

"I believe that the clots causing the strokes are not clots at all, but vegetations, or large particles of bacteria that got caught in the tiny vessels of the brain. The main colony of bacteria is likely growing on one of the valves of his heart, which is the most common source for infections such as these and would explain the fever. Now, pieces of it have broken off and are lodged in the arteries of his brain, causing a loss of blood flow to specific areas and damaging the vessel walls. The bacteria are still alive there, you must understand, and they are eating. It is imperative that we admit him and begin treating with aggressive antibiotics at once. If we do not and the bacteria eat through the vessel walls entirely, he will bleed into his brain."

The family is naturally overwhelmed; they collapse into their seats together and sit for a while in silence. Mr. Garner continues to be delirious in his narrow hospital bed. Is this what Will encounters when she delivers disappointing news to the families of victims? Hannibal refocuses his thoughts again as they excuse themselves to begin the treatment process by laying out a care plan.

"Sensei, shikkari? (4) You're kind of distracted," Yuriko tells him as they walk back to the station. Either he was more obvious than he thought, or she's getting sharper. (It's likely the latter.)

"I am well, Reizei-kun. Let's get started on his orders. Full blood panel, a set of cultures and then start him on Vanc 1.5 grams, absolutely no anticoagulants, hydration," Hannibal dictates. "Don't let the nurses put a Foley in, vitals every two hours, an MRI/MRA of the head stat."

"Got it, but you know what they'll say, sensei," Yuriko hurries along with him, "there is no such thing as a stat MRI."

"Well, there is if I'm asking for it. Call them while I talk to Barnett to get the patient admitted to the neuro PCU. He needs a close watch where the nurses know how to spot a bleed."
Yuriko's already whirling into a seat at the station, motioning to one of the nurses to come. "Let's see. Diagnosis: bacterial endocarditis with septic emboli to the brain?" When Hannibal nods, she beams. "By the way, sensei, that was amazing."

Hannibal manages a faint smile as he dials his colleague, thinking, If you think that was amazing, child, you will be struck speechless when you meet my Will.

"Thank you for your time, Doctor," Jack Crawford stands to shake his hand at the conclusion of Hannibal's official statement. "You've been a great help with the case. Incidental help, but we take anything we can get."

"Not at all a problem," Hannibal nods. "I'm merely relieved not to have to get my lawyer involved."

"No need for that, I assure you," Jack tells him, shoulders so confidently squared it's amusing to watch. Though Hannibal truly should give him due credit. This man handpicked Will, and before her, Miriam Lass. For that, Hannibal marks him dangerous. "On a slightly unrelated note, one I hope you won't tell Will I told you — "

Hannibal inclines his head, not a 'yes' though Jack takes it as one.

" — I worry about her state. Her mental state, I mean. She isn't delicate by far, but the cases, they get tough."

"She sees too much," Hannibal agrees quietly.

"I've had Dr. Bloom seeing her on a regular basis, but I don't think that was enough. She tried to quit on me two cases ago, and she's only been back on the field for barely three months. Rough three months, yes, but she's one of our very best and brightest, I'm sure you know. It's none of my business whatever is between the two of you, but I'm glad to see that she has support." Jack is forking over more information than Hannibal could ever ask for without seeming suspicious or disingenuous. He has to fight a smile. Jack continues, "You are supporting her, yes?"

"Entirely," Hannibal assures him, keeping his tone even and his smile kind.

"Good," Jack nods, frown smoothing away in restored confidence. "She’ll need you. She's starting to adjust, but it takes profilers a while to get back into the rhythm. It isn't an easy job."

"No, it's not," Hannibal agrees. They leave the private space of Jack's office and walk down the halls together. "I hear she is here today for a seminar. Might you direct me to her office? I'd like to see her if she has some time for me."

Jack stops short. "Oh, no, she won't be in her office. She's presenting that seminar. It started, let's see, fifteen minutes ago. If you have time, doctor, Will always gives some of the best case presentations I've ever seen. We can sit you in."

Of course Hannibal agrees. "I always have time for Will."

He follows after Jack down a different hallway, adjusting a button on his suit jacket. The rest of his Friday is free, having negotiated a late-notice change of schedule by telling his immediate superior that the FBI is demanding his presence. Dr. Albertson, of course, readily agreed. "You must go,
naturally, it's the FBI," Michael had said. "Just do come back in one piece, alright? The nurses will murder me in my sleep if you don't."

Through several long hallways and past offices they go, until they come to a section of the building filled with large auditoriums and smaller lecture halls. Jack walks up to a set of closed doors and eases one open, slipping inside. Hannibal smiles at the sound of Will's voice.

"...familiar with the four phases of crime, I assume, since you have to have passed your classes to be able to gain your badges," Will is saying to her rapt audience; people chuckle. It's a full hall; Hannibal and Jack have to stand at the back for the lack of open seats. They are not the only ones standing either. "This seminar is not meant to educate you on such basic principles; my goal is to give you studies in their application."

Will lectures without the aide of notes or Powerpoint slides, simply standing in front of the podium and leaning back against it as she talks. Right now she has her arms crossed; at times, she motions or gestures with one hand to emphasize her words. Once in a while she adjusts her glasses, but her eyes remain constantly roving, avoiding eye contact with any single person — avoiding eye contact altogether. Given her steady countenance, Hannibal doubts that she noticed him and Jack enter together.

"When you registered for this seminar, you should have received an email that included some instructions. I asked all of you to come today with a case in mind — a full one, could be hypothetical, with a good handle on the details of the crime and the perpetrator as well. I will ask you, over the course of the next two hours, to describe for me the crime scene, just the scene, with as much detail as you can manage. From there, I will profile your perpetrator, step by step, explaining each conclusion I draw so that you may see the method in action as I work through each phase of the crime."

A ripple runs through the crowd. It's a demonstration. None of them expected it. Hannibal leans against the wall behind him and puts his hands in his pockets. He will be here for a while; his beautiful, brilliant Will is demonstrating her singular genius.

It takes some time but they begin, first with simple cases that are summarily dismissed. "Come on," Will sighs, leveling them all with a disappointed look. "Flex your imagination; you'll need at least that to catch your criminals."

Hannibal listens with mounting amusement as they attempt to throw more complicated cases at her. She dismantles each one. If Will's intelligence was ever under doubt, that doubt is no longer. Her insight slices through each scenario the way a hot knife cuts through butter.

"If you want to know how I'm picking your cases apart so easily," Will tells them, "it is because you are creating them around the perpetrator. And no matter what they do, at the end of the day, they are still human. This is why I chose anthropology as my degree. These criminals still have needs and wants, dreams and desires, aspirations, frustrations, great loves and great heartaches, just like every single one of us. A terrifying thought, to be sure, but it's true. There are only a few exceptions to this rule, one notably when the criminal suffers from a psychiatric or neurological disorder that completely removes them from reality. In such a case, it becomes more difficult to pin down their motivations, their thoughts, because they operate on a plane separate from the rest of us."

"Do you think that's what the Chesapeake Ripper has?" someone asks from the left. "Some sort of psychiatric or mental disorder that makes him so hard to catch?"

A sharp tingle runs down Hannibal's spine, a foreign sensation: the feeling of being hunted.
Will barely shifts her stance, perhaps having expected the question. Beside Hannibal, Jack Crawford is strung tight as a live wire.

"I suppose he's one we can tackle," Will mutters, knuckles rubbing at the side of her nose. She straightens, levering away from the podium to pace around it. "At risk of further perpetuating his cult status, I will say that the Chesapeake Ripper is a singularity among his kind. This killer is unlike anyone we have ever encountered before. It's as if..." she huffs, pursing her lips, pausing as she paces, here and yet very far away, "it's as if we're fumbling about in a dark forest while we know that there is a superior predator lurking in the shadows, just waiting for the right time to strike."

Hannibal brings up a hand to cover his lips, unable as he is to completely restrain a viciously delighted smile. His fingers twitch in the desire to snare Will by her delicate neck, to grab her and take her and keep her for himself. To pry her skull open and see the cogs turning inside. To exist under her skin, to think what she thinks, to feel what she feels, to see what she sees.

He has never before experienced such a thorough, desperate need to possess.

Will continues. "Most killers are identified by patterns that emerge from a string of victims over time. We pay attention to method and victimology. We pay attention to killing cycles and intervals. We pick at every little detail we can. So when we miss a killer, it's usually one of two reasons. Primarily, it's because they didn't kill enough to leave a pattern for us — that goes for the large majority of uncaught killers beyond these walls. But the Ripper fits in the second category."

"The Ripper doesn't have a solid pattern?" someone throws out from the audience.

"Yes, he does!" someone else counters from the opposite side of the hall. "That's how we know it's the Ripper."

"Correct," Will nods. "He does have a pattern; it's a rare, cyclic one the significance of which we have yet to unravel. Twenty-two possible signature components. Take a moment to consider that. Twenty-two."

"It's a lot," a girl says from somewhere near the front.

"It's a whole dozen more than the markers we had for some of our most prolific, evasive serial killers in all of law enforcement history. The Ripper may well be the one standing above them all," Will elaborates. "Some of the markers aren't even positives but negatives — rather, what isn't there, instead of something that is. It tells us how deliberate the Ripper is, taking the time to manipulate every tableau of a crime scene — even the blank spaces in between.

"We would not be able to identify these negative markers if we didn't have knowledge gained from many other serial killers before him. We only know through comparison, much the same way art historians only know that there existed a separate, distinct Minoan civilization on Crete because one could compare Minoan art against the coexisting Egyptians, Syrians, and ancient Greeks of the time. The Ripper's existence is defined as much by his ostentatious displays as it is by the negative space he creates around himself. He intentionally cleaves away from the rest of the hunting pack — no," Will catches herself, placing fingers on her lips as she thinks, "It is his very identity that separates him from the rest of the hunting pack."

"A lone wolf?" someone says.

"A leopard," Will shakes her head, "well-camouflaged and stealthy. An opportunistic hunter who never says no to chance meat — and all the same would never settle for a used carcass even if it were readily available. A broad diet indicating a wide selection of prey. Fast, strong, and adaptable to
changing conditions. An intelligent lone hunter. Incredibly, frighteningly intelligent."

The whole hall is silent for a while, awaiting Will, who is standing still and appears to be deep in thought. She doesn't look up but eventually waves her hand and continues in a quieter voice.

"You must wonder what we can glean from all of this speculation. Would it not be more productive to keep pursuing solid evidence, keep compiling data on his methodology, keep attempting to find a pattern in his victimology? Perhaps. But what this tells me is that the Ripper is entirely sane. He does not have a psychiatric disorder disconnecting him from reality. He's too organized. He's too clean."

Will inhales and declares, "Hard as it may be to accept, the Ripper is one of us. He's a normalized, stable, contributing citizen of the community. Look beside you, look behind you. This is why he is so hard to catch. He could be anybody. He's here, in this room, like that lone leopard in the tall grass, hiding in plain sight."

Hannibal has to lean back against the wall behind him, hand covering the lower half of his face. The yearning to touch Will is now extreme and hard to control. If she doesn't finish soon, he may interrupt the whole hall to do something that will make a scene and embarrass her. That, or he may need to miss the rest of the presentation and step out to compose himself.

"And yet at the same time," Will stops in front of the podium again, leaning back against it with both hands braced, "he can't be just anybody. This sort of intelligence shines. A highly intellectual, highly skilled profession; a graduate or doctorate degree, if not several; surgical skills keen enough to achieve the precise cuts on the bodies; a background in culture and history and lore. The symbolism in his displays suggest as much. He has to have an occupation that allows him quite a lot of time to stalk and study before the hunt. And he has enough know-how to clean the scene up well enough, to run circles around us, to disappear."

"How do you know it's a guy?"

Will shrugs one shoulder. "Gut, and if that fails, statistics."

An uneasy laughter ripples across the room.

Someone in the front row, a man, raises his hand briefly and speaks at Will's nod. "You've told us how you see the Ripper. How does the Ripper see himself?"

The question speaks of how much confidence they have in Will, how much clout she has, how highly they think of her insight. She takes off her glasses at this point and massages the bridge of her nose, eyes closed as she heaves a sigh.

"An artist, Agent Hotchner. The Ripper sees himself as an artist of the floating world." (5)

At that moment, Hannibal could have wept for joy.

Hannibal has a moment to collect himself once the seminar is dismissed. Will remains occupied for a good fifteen minutes, swarmed by fellow agents, interns, and outsider spectators from other divisions of the Bureau. He waits until almost everyone has left, with the exception of a few stragglers who are either talking amongst themselves or were also waiting for Will to be free.

Jack descends the stairs first; Hannibal follows. Perhaps she is just that conscious of her imposing
superior, but Will notices them at once and visibly sags against the podium.

"I thought we had an agreement," Will sighs, turning to Hannibal with a reluctant half-smile. "You were supposed to warn me before you sat in a class."

"Technically, I did not sit, and it was not a class," Hannibal points out, for which he receives a side-eye. "My apologies; it was entirely unplanned. Mr. Crawford asked for me to come over to conclude some paperwork and mentioned that you were holding a seminar. We then decided to come."

"Sure, of course," Will mutters, still off-put and looking mildly embarrassed. She opens her mouth to further retort, but sees something behind Jack and clicks her teeth shut.

"Jack, Will," a familiar voice greets. Hannibal appraises Alana Bloom this close for the first time in years. She puts herself to one side of Will and entreats them all with a lovely smile. Admirably, the smile barely falters when it alights upon Hannibal. "Dr. Lecter, what a surprise."

"Dr. Bloom," Hannibal acknowledges, tilting his head with a nod. Will is notably more tense now, fingers picking at the hem of her knit pullover. There is a darkening to her eyes, a disenfranchised cast to the tilt of her frowning lips. She does not like that Alana is here. She feels threatened.

"That's right," Jack shortles, "you two know each other! Small world!"

"Exceedingly so, in the right spheres," Hannibal agrees.

"Will," Alana entreats, "you never mentioned that you knew Dr. Lecter."

Will shrugs. "It never came up."

During therapy, Hannibal realizes, because Alana is Will's psychiatrist appointed by the FBI. Of course Will feels threatened. Well, what to do about that?

"It was a rather serendipitous meeting," Hannibal confesses with a small smile. "I was very fortunate that I found Will again. I thought I never would."

Will scowls, looking down at the knot of Alana's scarf instead of meeting her eyes. "It's not something I wanted or needed to discuss, that's all."

Alana, perhaps sensing that she's on the verge of angering Will, wisely retreats. "Well, that's alright, I was just surprised," she says.

Jack grunts. "Me too. Well, I need to be going; I've wasted enough time here as it is. Dr. Lecter, thank you again for coming. Dr. Bloom, good day to you. Will, I'll see you later."

"Sure, Jack," Will mutters in a tone that is almost bone-dry, dripping with a degree of sarcasm that fails to communicate because only Will can see the punchline.

What Hannibal would do to have the privilege of thoroughly knowing her thoughts.

Alana shifts, meaning to engage Will in conversation. Hannibal cuts her expertly and leans forward to catch Will's eye.

"I was supposed to be at work until late tonight, but now I have a whole evening to spare. Would you be open to the idea of another dinner?" he asks softly, phrasing his sentence just so. In the periphery of his vision, he sees Alana freeze.

"Uh, like I said before: does anyone ever refuse your dinners?" Will blinks.
Hannibal allows his face to ease into a tempered sort of delight. "Then it is decided. We shall have dinner. Perhaps you would like to return to your house and tend the dogs first, so that we can take our time with the food."

Will nods. "Sounds like a plan. Alana, thanks for coming. I'll see you next week," she bids, taking Hannibal's arm and together heading for the door. Behind them, they leave Alana standing in an empty lecture hall, looking bereft of answers and more than just a little confused.

Once they make it down the hall to Will's tiny office, Hannibal breaks the silence. "Are we running away for any particular reason?"

"It's bad enough that I'll have to weather the questions next week. I don't feel like having the Spanish Inquisition today." Will starts shoving some folders, a Kindle, and her tablet into her bag. She shoulders it and locks the office door behind her with the turn of a key. SSA Willow Graham, Profiler, says the plaque on the wall. She huffs, shoulders sagging, and turns to face Hannibal with contrite blue eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be a grouch with you. The whole… thing with Alana and Jack just puts me in a bad mood, that's all."

Hannibal smiles, reaching up to run a thumb across her cheek while no one else is around to see. "Never apologize to me for such a thing, dearest. I relish you in every form and permutation."

Will blushed bright at his words, ducking as if to physically avoid his gaze. They start walking to the exit, shoulders side by side. "Are you sure you want to do dinner tonight? — I only mean, Baltimore's a very long drive, and then you'd have to prepare the food, and — um, if you want, we can have dinner at my house?"

Her voice trails off until it is as ephemeral as a summer breeze. Her fingers fiddle with the strap of her bag, back and forth, back and forth, a comforting motion.

"If you do not mind my imposition," Hannibal slowly, carefully responds, "then I would be more than happy to be a guest in your home."

The smile that appears on her face is so small Hannibal almost misses it. "You'll have to stop for some groceries on the way."

"Then perhaps you may go ahead of me, tend to the dogs, and hide all the things you wish to withhold from my eyes before I arrive."

Will is startled into sharp laughter. "You make it sound like I'm hiding literal skeletons in my closet. What would I have to hide from you, except the dog hair and my mess?"

"Oh, you would think of more ingenious places to hide bodies than your closet, I should imagine, and more inventive ways to do so as well. In between the walls, perhaps. Innovative insulation, I think is what they call it."

Will laughs again, cheeks pinking and eyes narrowing as a grin splits across her face. "You are appallingly morbid, Hannibal Lecter, and hideous for suggesting that I would pull inspiration from Poe. Poe, of all people!"

"Would you prefer Shelley and her Monster?"

"I would not, thank you. My car is here. I'll see you at the house."

Hannibal chuckles, watching her walk away in a playful huff. He goes to find his own car, thinking about dinner recipes and wondering what she will show him next.
Pistachios, nutmeg, almonds, and chestnuts. Bell peppers, fresh spinach, arugula, zucchini. Eggplants, marjoram, fennel and onions. A handful of shallots, thyme, bay leaves, celery. Will tells him that she has fresh parsley in her house, basil too, lemons and peppers. Hannibal has neither the time to travel back to Baltimore to fetch his own meat nor the willingness to settle for whatever substandard produce the market will have, so he asks Will if she has any fish.

*Trout in the freezer.*

Hannibal smiles and texts back: *How fresh?*

*Cought it yesterday. Fresh enough for you?*

*It will do,* he tells her, proceeding along the aisles in search of heavy cream and stock. This is purportedly the foremost organic market in the area, but Hannibal still finds it lacking as he examines with a critical eye the vegetables on display. With renewed determination, he resolves to feed Will more often.

Armed with his purchase, he drives the rest of the distance to Wolf Trap and parks just as the sun is beginning to set behind the trees. At the door, the dogs swarm at his feet for only a moment. They are obedient and Will is an efficient master, herding them back with a few clicks of her tongue.

"Sorry," she pushes one persistent dog back with a gentle sock-clad foot. "They get excited with strangers."

Hannibal sets down his purchases, removes vest and jacket, and crouches to offer his fist for them to scent. "They are friendly and well-behaved. All signs of a good master."

Will only shakes her head, ducking away from him to take the groceries to her kitchen. Hannibal notes that she has showered and changed her clothes, now clad in soft jeans and a navy knit sweater. Dark colors do wonders for her complexion, highlighting her paleness and bringing out the bright blue of her eyes. One day, he will convince her to abandon the glasses so that he may have the pleasure of always looking upon her unobstructed face.

"Kitchen this way, chef," Will beckons, motioning for the dogs to stay. They take their respective positions on pillows and cushions and by the fire, content now after they have had their run outside. "Tell me what I can do to help."

Will's kitchen is small but remarkably clean despite the pets. The small square space is unobstructed, affording him plenty of space to work. He rolls up his sleeves and accepts the blue apron. "Have you ever had chestnut soup, Will?"

"I can't say I have." She shrugs into her own apron, a brown one with paw prints.

"It is my hope that you'll like it. Everything should take less than an hour to prepare, by which time we will both be hungry enough to enjoy a hearty meal."

Will proves to be a deft sous chef, a fast learner in all things, watching his movements carefully when he demonstrates and then replicating the motion with minimal effort. Hannibal appropriates a deep saucepan to begin the soup while Will prepares the trout for frying.
"How are you cooking the trout?" she asks, fingers gut-deep.

"A la meunière amandine," Hannibal tells her, "a classic French dish quite popular where you're from, in fact."

"Then I've probably eaten it but just didn't know the French name."

"The trout is breaded and fried, quite straightforward, and then dressed in sauce."

"And the sauce is...?"

"Butter cooked over medium heat with vinegar and lemon juice whisked in. Once dressed, we can sprinkle the almonds on top, garnish with fresh parsley, and serve with slices of lemon to cleanse the palate."

"Does the soup have a fancy name too?" she asks, cheek plain in her voice.

"Velouté de châtaignes."

"Which means?"

"Cream of chestnut."

She laughs, in here a much warmer and brighter sound. The comfort of her own home is evident in the relaxed set of her shoulders, the easier smile gathering first around the corners of her eyes. "It sounds so much fancier in French."

"The illusions of language," Hannibal smiles in turn. "I have been told that Russian, to unaccustomed ears, sounds like Klingon."

Will laughs. Before her, the filetted trout is arranged in neat lines, awaiting Hannibal's hands. "Yeah, and Arabic sounds like Parseltongue. People seem to think it's objective but there are plenty of cultural associations, if one looks close enough."

"Strictly speaking," Hannibal muses as he grinds the chestnuts, "Parseltongue should sound similar to Hindustani, if one were considering the history of snake-charming."

Will laughs again. "You've read Harry Potter."

"In my intern's words: who hasn't?" They switch positions for Will to man the soup while Hannibal breads the fish. "Yuriko was quite insistent that I read them, so that I would understand her references and colloquialisms with more ease."

"And what did you think?"

"A satisfactory study on the nature of good and evil. Certainly a fine feat of a wide imagination, though there were several glaring inconsistencies with the plot. I was only quite disappointed with Snape's death. It felt... premature."

Will starts chortling. "I can't believe we're discussing Harry Potter over my kitchen counter."

"My dear, there is nothing I would not discuss with you. You have unique insight and a beautiful mind."

"It's a broken mind," she shrugs. "It's nothing to admire."
"Your persistent low regard of your own singularity is concerning. We shall have to do something about that too."

Will sighs, looking soft and uncertain, her eyes trained on the bubbling pot. Hannibal's hand flexes, wanting to touch her face. She says, "I'm still astounded you even want to try."

"Then I am glad," Hannibal tells her, "because I want to be someone who regularly astounds you."

Suddenly she turns and tiptoes up to press a soft kiss on his cheek. "You do."

Midway through preparations, Will confesses that she has a few wine bottles that might pair well with their food. "It's nothing like your wine cellar, I'm sure, but maybe you can make something work."

"Let us see."

She leads him to a pantry, the bottom of which holds a wine rack appropriately kept where it is cold and dark. Hannibal has to crouch to reach them. One at a time, he pulls each wine off the rack to glance at the labels. There are only seven bottles, measly in comparison to his own collection, but Hannibal knows Will prefers spirits and liquor, so he did not expect much to begin with.

"Ah, you have Gamay," Hannibal notes with pleasure and surprise. Will leans over his shoulder, casting a shadow on the label as she squints. He says, "A fine vintage as well. This will pair well with both the trout and the soup." He rises to decant and chill the wine for them.

"Fleurie La Madone," Will murmurs under her breath, squinting at the label. "This was the bottle Alana gave me when I graduated with my Master's."

"Fleurie is one of the best regions for Beaujolais in France. The cru is grown at a higher altitude on the steep slopes at the foot of La Madone. It is a red blend, but lighter than most reds, and thus sufficient for our meal tonight. You will find it aromatic and fruity. A friendly wine to acquaint with when one's palate is just beginning to develop."

"Is that what you're doing? Developing my palate?" says Will. "I should warn you that it's all but destroyed from a lifetime of generic American trash food."

Hannibal keeps any expression of disdain clear from his face and merely assures her, "Worry not; you will develop one. A soft spot on your tongue where you remember, where you will assign words and feelings to the textures of taste. Eating will become a discipline, if given enough time and attention. It will also become language-obsessed. Your vocabulary will grow. You will give voice and name to each note of flavor. You will never simply eat food again."

"I'm not sure I can acquire your eloquence with flavor but I promise that I'll give it a try," Will shrugs. "I don't even know how to distinguish between the basic types of wine."

"Wine is an art," Hannibal tells her as he cuts the foil below the bottle's lip. "Instead of attempting to distinguish between the types of wine, I want you to pay attention and distinguish between notes of taste."

Reaching over with his left hand, he places a single finger on her lips. She holds her breath.
"Grapes, apricot, roses, vanilla. Wood and butter, clay, minerals, spice. Each taste registers on a different set of spots on your tongue. You have this knowledge in your subconscious, you have had it since you were little; now you simply need to be conscious of it. You need not know the types or names of all the wines in the world; you only need to be able to see what the grapes tell you about how they were grown and what kind of soil fed them as they ripened under the sun."

He removes his finger and she sags against the counter, arms bracing but eyes never leaving his.

"There is no word for it in English," Hannibal continues, "but this is called terroir. Earth. Soil. It cannot be translated simply because to each area of the world, it is unique. Like tristesse, or altérité, or la douleur exquise, it is a word full of grey. French does ambiguity much better than English. Our language relies on fixedness because that is what the economy demands; a commodity must always be identifiable, after all. But one can never successfully commodify the taste of the earth."

"Just the way you know it's Champagne when you taste it?"

"Precisely. The chalk content of the soil; the cold northern climate; the slow second fermentation — it can only come from one place in the world. Wine tells the stories of its origins, much like we do as human beings. One simply needs to learn to pay attention."

"I pay attention," Will tells him, "and I still can't fathom where in the world someone like you came from."

Hannibal turns to her, amused. "Are you comparing me to wine?"

"A finely aged bottle. Excellent vintage year. Fetches a high price."

"Aged, I see. Yes, well. You will find that if a wine has alcohol concentration and tannin content working together to create a solid structure base, flavor and form intensify over time."

He begins plating their dishes, which are about done, all the while pretending not to notice the degree of Will's shock. Her eyes are wide, blinking rapidly in disbelief. She remains mute for a few more moments, before choking out, "You did not just — did you just use wine to make a sexual innuendo?"

Hannibal has to chuckle. "My apologies. I simply find it difficult to control myself when I am with you, my dear."

"No, please, I mean, go ahead," Will spreads her arms. "I'm interested to see how bad these puns and innuendos will get." And then, after a pause during which Hannibal's smile acquires a wilier tilt, "I'm going to regret that, aren't I."

Returning her earlier gesture, Hannibal leans towards her on his way to the dinner table, pressing a kiss on the corner of her mouth. "It is my endeavor to give you no regrets."

She helps him prepare the table, hand catching at his fingers and pausing them both for a moment. "You know that's a futile endeavor, right?"

"So is perfection in life, and yet we still strive for it. For you, I shall do the same."

After that, she has nothing to say for a while.
They eat dinner facing each other on the small dining table Will prepared. "It sounds pathetic, but I almost never have guests, so I didn't see the point in a larger table."

"It's large enough for the two of us," Hannibal assures her, "and that is all that matters." The table is square and set beside a window overlooking her spacious backyard. In the distance, through the windows, the trees are dark silhouettes reaching for a rising moon. "Do you ever eat at this table?"

Will scratches her cheek, a sure sign of embarrassment. "It's that obvious, huh."

"Is it that you always eat alone?"

"Not anymore, not with you. That smells heavenly. I can't believe that was made in my hovel of a kitchen. Have I apologized yet for imposing on you again? It seems like all you do is feed me, these days."

Hannibal clicks his tongue. "Your kitchen is not a hovel, and you are certainly never an imposition. A welcome distraction, perhaps, but never an imposition. And I am always delighted to be the one to amuse your palate."

"Oh, you do more than amuse it; you astound it. Thank you," she smiles, receiving her bowl of chestnut soup. She dips her nose towards it and inhales, eyes fluttering shut. "Heaven."

It takes all of Hannibal's restraint not to whisk her away from the table to — well. There are many things he wants to do to her, few of which are appropriate for a kitchen. He contents himself with memorizing the difference of shade between the dark curl of her eyelashes and the paleness of her skin.

She delights openly in the food, something that has always tickled Hannibal about her. Will genuinely enjoys what he prepares, each time, every time. When she eats with him, her walls fall away and she is honest, allowing him to glimpse a facet of her truth. Even just glimpsing it is tantalizing.

If only he had found her far earlier.

After dinner, they take their dessert (pistachio financiers he quickly prepared in the oven) and the wine to her living room. She kindles the fireplace while he walks around, inspecting the long desk with the bright lures, the round table stacked with confidential files and students' papers, the few pieces of art on the wall, all bland and abstract as if their aim was to decorate without attracting attention. With her sensitive perception, subtle pieces do make sense.

The dogs rearrange themselves when Will comes into the room. There are seven of them that Hannibal can count, all mutts from their looks, except for the intelligent-seeming golden retriever. Winston, if he isn't mistaken.

He stops in front of the upright piano and presses a key. Crouched in front of the fireplace, Will looks up.

"A song for a song?" Hannibal offers.

Will smiles. "You first."
Wordlessly, he sits. The keys are in tune, the strings resounding with clarity that tells him how well Will takes care of this instrument. He smiles, his appraisal of her rising even more.

"I wrote this song for you," Hannibal confesses quietly, beginning the first few notes with a light touch. At first, the composition is pensive, but as it progresses, it unfolds into a light waltz, reminding Hannibal of the delicate dance bringing them ever closer to each other. (2)

Will comes to sit on a stool beside him, close enough to touch, certainly close enough for their shared warmth to heat his skin. It is a lengthier composition than his usual pieces, but Will listens to the whole thing with rapt devotion, eyes closed and body swaying gently with the cadence. Her eyes remain closed when he finishes. Hannibal sits there and gazes upon her peaceful face, transfixed, counting out the freckles dotting her nose and calculating the angle of her cheekbones.

"Would that I could play for you always so that you may have this peace of mind," he sighs, and Will opens her eyes.

"Only a fool would spend their time playing for me always, Hannibal."

"Then I am your fool." He takes her hand and kisses it, his own eyes shut. He agrees with her; he is a fool for pinning his hopes on the mere potential of a companion. But it's this feeling. This feeling is foreign to him, this sensation of free-falling as if he had voluntarily stepped off a cliff. He knows she feels it too.

She rises from the stool and nudges him away from the piano, setting her own slender fingers on the keys. "I haven't done this in a while so don't judge me too harshly, okay? I only know a few songs, most of them from Mrs. Bradley, but I do know them well."

Hannibal is about to say something reassuring when she opens her mouth and begins to sing.

"He's a fool, and don't I know it
But a fool can have his charms
I'm in love, and don't I show it
Like a babe in arms..."

Awestruck.

He is awestruck at the soft, melodic lilt of her song. Her voice is low, warm, a little rough from disuse and altogether perfect. It washes over him, every thought and every sense, sending shivers down his spine and bright sparks across his mind palace. When was the last time anyone sang a song for him?

Močia.

His mother. She was the last one who sang for him.

"I'll sing to him, each spring to him
And long for the day when I'll cling to him
Bewitched, bothered, and bewildered am I..." (8)

Will continues to sing and Hannibal continues to marvel at her very existence, at his fortune, at their beautiful serendipity. In these moments, he knows her. He remembers her, because she is him. She reflects him. She contains multitudes. Every experience is a crush coursing through her, the same as it does to him. But unlike her, he takes every experience on the pulse, whereas she has been taught to shy away, to avoid.
But she shall do so no longer, for he will teach her that the world is abundant, that if one invests in it, it gives back tenfold. He will show her all there is to see, of the world and of himself as well, and one day...

One day, she will willingly offer that same trust back to him, so that they may see each other for what they are.

It is an ambitious goal, one that could perhaps destroy everything he has built in life if it all goes wrong — but Hannibal has risked for less. His extraordinary Will is every bit worth it.

REFERENCES

(1) An RP accent (“Received Pronunciation”) is the accent of Standard English in the UK, most prominent in the south of England, although it can be heard from native speakers throughout England and Wales.

(2) Hannibal’s song for Will is Ketil Bjornstad’s Pianology No. 1. Give it a listen. I consider it Saturn Rising’s theme song.

(3) Rashikunai na. That’s so unusual of you. (very casual)

(4) Sensei, shikkari? Professor, are you alright? (very casual)

(5) An artist of the floating world is a reference to Kazuo Ishiguro’s 1986 novel of the same name, which is set in post-WWII Japan and tells the story of an aging painter who looks back upon his life and how he has lived it. Foremost among the themes discussed in this book is the “pleasure era” of Japanese society, elaborating upon the life of successful people in a decadent era. It is also the literal translation of ukiyo-e, referring to Japanese art prints. So it can be read as “a printmaker” who is an artist living in a changing world, which is a pertinent theme in tumultuous post-WWII Japan. Thirdly, it is also an artistic genre or technique, where the depiction of scenes in art is made softer to imply the ephemeral nature of the “floating world” of human vices and pleasure.

(6) Here is the recipe for the velouté de châtaignes and the trout a la meunière amandine and the pistachio financiers.

(7) WINE LEGS. ALL THE LEGS.

(8) Will's song is Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered by Stacey Kent - that's the Will version. My actual favorite version is of course Ella Fitzgerald's version from 1956. Give both of them a listen, please, and then tell me what you think!
Chapter Summary

In which there is smut.

Yep, you read that right.

Also, a little bit of plot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She chose the house in Wolf Trap because of the trees. During the winter, they aren't much, just bare white bones sticking into the pale sky; occasionally twigs crack and branches fall, echoing across the empty woods, a sharp and mournful sound. But in the summer, when the branches are full and the foliage is at its height, the rustling of the leaves become gentle waves on a beach, as if the trees themselves have become the sea. She tells Hannibal as much.

"A sea of trees," Hannibal hums, reclined on her old, worn couch as if he belongs there. Will wants to keep him there, entirely and forever. He continues, "There is one in Japan, you know. Aokigahara, they call it, or Jukai. A solemnly beautiful place."

"The Suicide Forest?" Will muses, cradling her second glass of Beaujolais, which serves to relax her all the while heightening her senses as her inhibitions become dull. Thankfully between the two of them, the bottle is now empty. "You would call it beautiful?"

"There is beauty to be found in death, in the silence and stillness it brings."

From anyone else, such a declaration would seem trite. From Hannibal, it has the grim sincerity of confession.

"Sometimes death is not silent or still," Will tells him. "At least the ones I see are not. But — you're right. With this last one — they were very peaceful."

"Have you ever thought about suicide?" he asks, eyes dark.

"Have you?" she returns, eyes wandering over his face. He is even more handsome cast in firelight tonight, the immaculate fix of his hair mussed after the travails of a long day.

"Several times, at various points of my earlier life. Less lately. I am no stranger to despair." The confession slips easily from his lips, as if it costs him nothing, and yet as they come out, Will can feel the words tug at his chest, his throat, as if the words are hers. Is she so far gone that she can sink into him without noticing? Does she care?

"Despair and I," Will sighs, "are old friends. Suicide is not a stranger either."
"You have attempted it."

"Only once," Will admits, blinking against the churning wave of that black depression, a sizable piece of which is still contained within her. Still, her eyes are on his face. The words come out easier that way. They hurt less. Hannibal reaches for her wrist, the hand that isn't holding the wineglass, and runs a thumb against her pulse. "Oh, no," Will scoffs, "nothing that dramatic and futile. I wanted to go calmly and with as little mess as possible. Pills are very convenient for that. Didn't want to bother people too much with the clean-up."

After a moment's consideration, when Hannibal doesn't immediately respond, she backtracks. "I'm sorry. Was that a bit morbid?"

"Not such," Hannibal murmurs, taking his thumb away from her pulse and replacing it with his lips. "Simply curious about how your final concern was to avoid inconveniencing others."

"You should know of all people how hard it is to clean blood from surfaces."

"It's a very Japanese sentiment," Hannibal continues, as if she hadn't spoken at all, "avoiding inconveniencing others. Meiwaku kakitakunai, in their words. An entire culture built on respect and boundaries, much like your mind."

"Less respect, more boundaries," Will corrects, "and precisely because I often have very disrespectful thoughts."

"I find your thoughts riveting."

"They're inconvenient and messy and often disturbing."

"A wise woman once told me that the inconvenience we cause each other is the only proof that our lives ever touched, and without it, we would be mere shadows passing over each other, never touching, never bothering. To disturb someone's life is to move something within them or around them, a profoundly intimate thing if one allows it to be."

Will turns her hand under his lips and cups a palm across his cheekbones, bringing his face back up to the light. "Don't you resent me for disturbing your perfectly ordered life?"

He presses another kiss to her palm and follows it with the last sip from his wineglass. "Au contraire, dearest, I adore you for it."

She wants to laugh but can't. The urge is stuck in her throat. Instead, she leans over and presses a kiss to the corner of his lips. It is chaste but warm; he chases after her for another taste. This close, she can feel the smooth shift of his muscles when he curls an arm around her torso and pulls her into his lap. Will feels liquid heat pool underneath her skin, all over her body from the points where they touch. All thought skitters out of her mind, leaving her blissfully blank. In this moment, she is the breath of air that fans over Hannibal's cheek, the brush of his thumb at the nape of her neck, the desperate way her fingers clutch at his shoulder, the possessive manner he cradles the weight of her head.

Is this what desire feels like? Is this lust? Do other women act as desperate as she feels? Do they feel like they're drowning too?

When they part for air and she opens her eyes once more, she is squarely on Hannibal's lap, held fast in between strong arms that seem highly unwilling to let her go. Will spreads five fingers over one, gripping Hannibal's biceps in mute disbelief. He takes the chance to push his face into her neck to inhale deep. Moist lips brush against her collarbone, eliciting a shiver. They travel sideways, then up,
along the jugular, beneath her jaw. She exhales, shaken, and wraps an arm around him tight.

They kiss again and again, a glorious repetition of lips and tongue and teeth sliding against each other, each time parting only for a second because that is all they can bear. Will straddles Hannibal to bring their bodies flush and close, heat pooling in her gut when she feels the evidence of his desire press against her thigh. This is uncharted territory for her. She has never gone this far. No one has ever been safe enough to — no one has ever —

Hannibal gentles his touch and moves his lips to her neck, resting there with stillness that must require an iron control. It takes him a while to regain speech, something that Will feels quietly proud about. "At your pace, always, dearest. We need not do anything that will make you uncomfortable."

Such a gentleman he is. Will rests her cheek on the crown of his head, cradling him, carding fingers through his fine ash-colored hair. She clears her throat and forces the words out. "I want you, but I just don't know what to do. I haven't exactly been — I haven't done this in a while. A long while. And it never — " she swallows, squeezing her eyes shut, " — no one ever came close enough to — "

"Hush," he whispers. When he looks at her, his eyes are dark and patient, just like they have always been since they met. "We need not rush. We have so much time. I have you now. I can show you."

His thumb rests on her lower lip, flush and exerting just enough pressure to make Will's eyes fall shut. The heat of his gaze never falters.

"I'm sure you can," Will sighs, turning her face into his palm. Her eyes remain closed, eyelids fluttering as she exhales. "I can see just how many people would fall over themselves for a chance to have you."

"And yet you have me," Hannibal says with much amusement. "How does that make you feel, Will?"

Will looks down at him, this singular man who has insinuated himself into her life without flinching at the darkness dwelling inside of her head. She would be a true fool if she were to let him go.

"Astonished. Powerful." She kisses his mouth again, slow and sweet. "Happy."

In the morning, Will wakes in her bed, alone and drenched in sweat. Her hands are twisted in the sheets, reaching for something that was wrenched away in her dream. She thinks of Hannibal and has to stand, tottering into the bathroom to sit on the toilet.

She stays there for a while until Winston nudges her knee. Smart boy, Winston. Will pets his floppy ears and presses kisses on top of his furry head.

Winston stays there, spread out like a second rug at the lip of her bathtub, while she showers the night sweat off. If she were by herself, she would have traipsed around the house in her underwear, but she reminds herself that she has a guest next door. Pajama pants and t-shirt and cardigan it is. When she tiptoes downstairs, she finds Hannibal in the kitchen making coffee with a French press she forgot she owned.
"Good morning," he bids, pouring her a piping mug.

She takes it absently and almost scalds herself, too captivated with Hannibal's casual, almost careless, dress. "I didn't imagine you even owned t-shirts."

Hannibal's lip quirks, halfway between a frown and a fond smile. "They are convenient for certain things. The hospital, for one."

"You wear t-shirts to the hospital," she repeats, blinking up at his face.

"On the occasion that I must stay for an extended period of time, when there is no other coverage or the department requires my help, I will wear a t-shirt underneath a set of scrubs. Do all of your pajamas have paw print design?"

Will startles into laughter, almost dropping her mug. "Quid pro quo? Yes, I think. I love dogs, alright."

Hannibal merely smiles. "I can see that. Would you like some breakfast?"

On cue, Will's stomach gurgles. "Uhh, I can make something for us. You're my guest, you shouldn't have to cook for me."

"I don't have to, but I want to," he gently insists, crowding her to one side of the kitchen from where she may watch while enjoying her coffee. He tells her to do so. "I was intending to have breakfast ready by the time you woke."

"I'm a stranger to sleep," Will shrugs, and then hastily adds, "It wasn't you at all; I just never sleep well. My imagination is too wild when I'm awake; imagine what it's like when I'm dreaming."

"Consuming," Hannibal nods. "I understand."

"What's your excuse? It's one of the few days you could have slept in."

"I gave up healthy sleeping habits long ago in medical school," Hannibal confesses, "and trained my body to subsist on four or five hours during residency."

"Brutal," she comments.

"Necessary. Some days there would be no sleep for us. To put it simply, only the fittest survive.""You survived," Will leans on the counter, "and with flying colors. The very best of your whole year. A prodigy, your professors would say. A genius."

Hannibal breaks eggs against the counter and graces her with an amused smile. "Is this your empathy at work, or are you attempting flattery, my dear?"

"Can it not be both?"

He has nothing to say in response to that. Will takes the small victory and puts down her coffee to open the doors for the dogs. They trample past her legs in a flurry of barks and eager panting, gambolling across the snow-covered yard with glee only such animals can muster. While watching them through the window, she feels the itch of an urge underneath her skin and for once indulges it, pulling out an old second-hand vinyl from the living room shelf and setting it to play.

If Hannibal minds the music, he does not say. Will doesn't ask, simply stands by the door and waits for the dogs to have their fill. She wraps cold fingers around her mug and sips at the coffee, aware at
all times where each of her dogs are. Fifteen minutes, she whistles to call them back in.

After wiping down each dog and praising them for their obedience, Will washes her hands and returns her now empty mug. Hannibal looks up from the omelettes and gives her a fond, quiet look. Ella's voice echoes around them, warm and soothing, and Will can pretend for a moment longer that they don't have to leave this precious space just yet. They still have time.

"What are you thinking?" Hannibal asks, holding her gaze even as he effortlessly plates their food.

"Wondering how much time I have left with you today."

He takes their garnished plates to the small table she has set in between washing her mug and humming to the music. She follows him, as in all things, and sits when he bids her. "I have errands to attend to but nothing so urgent that it requires my immediate attention," he tells her in response. "In fact, none of them need to be attended today, which is why I find myself too tempted to stay here with you."

Will chuckles. "I'm truly terrible for your agendas, aren't I?"

"A horrendous influence," Hannibal affirms, sitting down as she pours orange juice for them. "I will get nothing done because of you."

"And yet you'll stay," Will says, half-hopeful and half-afraid.

He smiles. "Yes, I will."

"For lunch, we may have the trout," Hannibal tells her, "if you have nothing else planned for it."

They are in the living room now, Will fussing with the vinyl player while Hannibal reclines on the couch with an enchanted Lila resting her head on his feet. He gazes upon the small, affectionate animal with consideration.

"We just had breakfast," Will says. "You're thinking about lunch already?"

"It helps to create fixed points during the day. Anchors, another way of looking at it. Particularly important when working in a hospital, where the hours blur together on the busiest of days."

"You use food as your anchor."

"In a manner of speaking."

"I can only wish," she snorts, shaking her head. "Have you always fed yourself so well? It seems like such an effort to undergo everyday, especially for someone who has a schedule as busy as yours. It has to be a habit."

Hannibal hums. "It has become one now, but there was once a time in my life when food was scarce and I took anything I could eat."

Will's fingers twitch, nudging the needle. Static crackles around them for a moment, just a moment, and then Ella is singing again.
"It was a very long time ago, in my childhood," Hannibal continues, quieter now, more subdued. "It gave me an appreciation for variety, quality, and taste. It taught me that food is life. Hunger shaped me, much the same way it shaped you."

At once, Will is in Louisiana, sitting on a lawn chair on the back deck of that little house that sat on the edge of Lake Pontchartrain. Mrs. Bradley's wind chimes tinkle behind her. The mashed potatoes are warm and soft inside her mouth, the spices from the gumbo hot and heavenly. Fat tears roll down her cheeks as she eats. Mrs. Bradley is gently petting her hair.

_I ain't ever seen a child strong as you_, Mrs. Bradley croons, _but even the strong ones cry. Ain't no shame in your tears, child. Ain't no shame in your hunger either. Sometimes in life you take what you can get. Little mercies go a long way, and this poor old lady got no mo' grandkids to feed anyhow. Your Pa, he tries, good man, but sometimes his best ain't enough for both of you, and that's just the truth of the matter. It's alright. You can come here anytime you like._

But it isn't because of the hunger that she cries. It's because of the despair she saw across her father's face when she told him she would go to Mrs. Bradley's house to ask for some food. They hadn't eaten in three days. He had been out of a job for a week.

"I had someone who saved me," Will confesses, "and I sometimes think that she shaped me more than the hunger did."

"Your Mrs. Bradley?"

"Yes." She turns to him, smiling at the way he now has Lila draped around his legs. "What about you?"

Hannibal is quiet again, subdued and with a faraway look in his eyes. After a while, Will sits beside him, unable to take her eyes from his face. When he returns to her, he wears an expression so affected Will is convinced he is but ten words away from tears.

"My aunt was a wise and beautiful woman," Hannibal tells her, "and even today, I sometimes catch myself wondering how she would approach a situation when I am in doubt."

The smile is quick to come to Will's lips. "All the time," she agrees. "If it were Mrs. Bradley, what would she do? I ask myself all the time -- and more so recently, I've found."

"Oh?"

Will pulls her feet up on the couch beside him and hugs her knees. "If it were Mrs. Bradley who had an intelligent, handsome, and highly eligible bachelor courting her, what would she do?"

An amused grin begins to grow on Hannibal's face; Will continues.

"And if Mrs. Bradley were told that this intelligent, handsome, highly eligible bachelor only had eyes for her, what would she say? How would she respond?"

"Mrs. Bradley, in her eminent wisdom, would allow the relationship to take its course in confidence of her suitor's words."

Will laughs, a sound that makes several of the dogs snuffle. They are so unused to it that they all swivel towards her.

"Mrs. Bradley is 78 now, Hannibal. I'm quite sure she'd just pat your cheek, tell you how adorable you are, and then feed you her homemade shortbread cookies. Ain't the dating sort no more, she'd
say. Ain't got the hips for all that."

This time, it is Hannibal who laughs, a deep, warm sound that Will takes and relishes and covets. She doesn't want him to laugh like that with anyone else, for anyone else, because of anyone else. The sudden possessiveness stabs her deep in her gut.

"Was it she who taught you how to cook?" Hannibal asks, eyes lighter with the melancholy banished from his countenance. Now he has eyes only for Will, his whole body turned towards her to show his focus.

"She gave me a cookbook when I graduated with my Bachelor's," Will ruefully smiles. "I rarely find the occasion to use the recipes, but I'm sure that'll change, if you have anything to say about it."

A commitment to pursuing a relationship. Isn't that the goal here? Will swallows her uncertainty and puts on a brave face. Trust still feels like falling, but Hannibal has large, warm hands. He'll catch her.

"Certainly it will," he agrees. "You make a good sous chef, and in time, we can improve your skills. There is a certain pleasure to be found in the mechanical motions of cooking, one I think will be soothing to your excitable brain. It is something I enjoy that I wish to share with you."

Will grins. "One of these days, I'll take you ice fishing, just to have the chance to see you in waders."

"I would be a willing participant in exchange for fresh trout."

"Still thinking about lunch? What was it that you wanted to do with my trout?"

"You shall see. For now," he reaches for her, "I am hungry for you."

With one kiss, Will is lost. She wraps an arm around his neck to pull him back and down as she reclines against the arm of the couch. What fear she felt the previous night, what reservations she saw in her mind, they have all vanished in the light of day. Suddenly everything before her is clear. She wants this.

Hannibal chases after her with hot lips; she reels him in and splays her fingers wide against his side, sliding up and underneath the incongruous shirt, skipping over expanding ribs and the spaces in between. He groans when she sets her nails against his skin.

"You will tell me to stop," he mouths against her neck, "whenever you are uncomfortable."

"Don't stop."

His weight settles in between her knees. Her legs hook around his back and hips. When his mouth closes hot and wet on top of her breast, through the thin white shirt under which she forgot to put a bra, she arches against him with a soundless gasp, eyes screwed shut in surprise.

It's been so long, oh, it's been so long. But Will wants this. She wants this.

"Don't stop," she says again, fingers tangling tight in his hair.

He doesn't. He pushes her shirt up with one finely calloused hand and cups her breast, returning to the other one with his mouth, but now lips to bare skin. The sensation makes her undulate underneath him; again, she feels his erection against her thigh, a hot hard line that makes her want more, more of him.

Hannibal knows what she wants, of course. Mouth unrelenting on her chest, he sneaks a hand down
her pajamas to dip between her legs. She almost twists off the couch at his first touch, but he parts her and slicks her and explores her with care and mastery of what feels good where. At least she thinks so. She strains and groans and gasps; he rubs harder, pushes a finger in and out and in again, sucks and bites at her nipples, leaves marks on her chest. His thumbnail catches on her clit once, twice, and with nary a warning, she comes, arms and legs tightening around his body to keep him close.

The world is hazy and spinning when she comes back down to earth. Hannibal rises from her much like a wild beast raising its bloodied muzzle from a kill. His eyes glitter darkly, the only clarity in a world of soft haziness. Will feels him pull fingers from within her, watches him put those same fingers in his mouth and suck.

Absolutely, entirely filthy — and it sends a sharp stab of heat across Will's body. Hannibal's eyes flutter and fall half-mast the way they do when he savors a particularly satisfying meal. With her spread out beneath him like this, boneless and tender and willing, Hannibal must feel as though he is partaking of a banquet prepared exclusively for him. Will reads it in his eyes. Instead of feeling threatened, she feels thrilled and more than a little smug.

Too soon, he tries to withdraw, and without giving satisfaction to himself. No. No, Will wants to give as much as she takes — she goes after him and climbs onto his lap, catching his hands when he tries to handle her hips.

"Let me give you this."

"You don't have to," he soothes her.

"But I want to," Will says, "and you told me once that I should have what I want."

Hannibal looks up at her in equal parts wonder and adoration. Will holds his gaze, unflinching, as she reaches into his pants and wraps her fingers around his length, giving an experimental pull.

Breath hisses past Hannibal's teeth, his impeccable control being tried as Will begins to undulate her body in time with the up and down motion of her hands. Hannibal is uncut, something that she recalls to be common in Europe. Nevertheless, she learns what he likes, what brings a flush to his cheekbones, what makes him gasp. Their lips slide together again and again, Hannibal licking up and into her mouth for a deeper taste while she imagines how it would feel to have the solid girth of him inside of her instead of just in her hand.

She groans into his mouth, aroused at the thought, her hand tightening involuntarily around the base of his cock. His hips jerk against hers; his head drops to rest against her shoulder. There is a fine layer of sweat on the back of his neck; his muscles are quivering.

"Will," he warns her, but Will takes it as encouragement. Her hand speeds up and her strokes get rougher, her thumb teasing around the foreskin, along the tip; with a muffled curse, he comes, all over her hand and their clothes, his grip on her hip no doubt leaving livid bruises for her to prod at tonight.

For a while, there is nothing but their harsh breaths against the silence. The vinyl jumps with rhythmic static, having reached the end of the record sometime during their tryst. After some minutes, Hannibal murmurs something soft against her neck and takes her soiled hand to his lips, laving and sucking at them with lazy contentment while Will rests her weight against him and watches. "You ruin me," he tells her, accent harsher. It doesn't take long after that for them to start kissing again.

Not just starved of food, Will thinks as Hannibal lays them down without heed of the mess. Starved
Hannibal radiates heat against her skin. His arms are strong and muscular, covered with fine hair and large veins from decades of work. His lips are thin but soft when they give against her questing fingers. His eyes, up close, are the warmest golden shade of hazel, with flecks of darker brown that seem almost red in the right light.

Will knows these things now. Will is eager to learn more. She is in the process of counting the reddish-brown flecks in his left iris when Hannibal murmurs to her that they should perhaps rise and clean up. She sighs, breath fanning across his cheeks.

"You still haven't told me what you wanted to do to my remaining trout."

"Something simple," he hums, fingertip tracing the shape of her nose. "Savory and aromatic."

"Simple for you is usually not simple for everybody else, especially when it comes to food."

But true to his word, the dish he prepares for them is simpler than his usual fare. When they do eventually get up, they go upstairs to wash and redress, after which Hannibal commandeers her kitchen once more and prepares for their lunch. Will didn't even notice how much time they spent simply laying on the couch wholly occupied with each other.

The trout is had with much relish, plated beautifully with an almost Japanese touch to the minimalism of its presentation. Four perfect squares of fish on each plate, mushroom-cured, interspersed with parsnip and finished with fried rosemary. In her cupboards he found small packets of wild rice to accompany the fish. The taste sits on the back of Will's throat well after they dine.

Dishes are put away afterwards. Dogs are fed. Hannibal takes her by the waist and spins her to Louis & Ella, visibly relishing her laughter, nosing against her cheeks. They swing around her small living room and Will feels the continuous fall, that drop in her belly, the gravity of his affection pulling her into his orbit. When she tells him so, he replies, "You do the same to me, my dear."

"You are such an incurable romantic," Will smiles. Her face hurts. She hasn't smiled so much in, well, ever.

Unwilling to be left out and forgotten, Lila curls and winds around their legs -- more Hannibal's -- prompting them to stop. Amused, Hannibal keeps them swaying in place, unwilling to remove his arms from holding Will.

"Was it your Mrs. Bradley who gave you the gift of music?" he asks.

"These are all songs I learned from her. She used to sing in New Orleans when she was younger. Clubs and bars, these types of songs. I'd trim her flowers and help clean her house; she'd make me food and sing along to her old records. Eventually she taught me to play. She was a widow player, so that's what I became too. I learned how to read music afterwards and it never really took. I have a harder time sight-reading than simply listening and then playing."

Hannibal hums against her ear. "What impeccable memory you have."
"Don't wanna hear it from you," Will snorts.

"I learned music formally, as a young man in Paris. In my childhood, music was a luxury we could not afford. War often has no patience for things of beauty, which is why I now choose to always put myself in beauty's way."

Will knows Hannibal means her. She pushes his face into his shoulder and sighs. They are well past the point of fighting this now.

"What are you doing for the holidays?" she asks instead, because she has her calendar on the wall within her line of sight and she can see that the rest of the month for her is all but empty.

"I am working over both Christmas and New Year's," Hannibal runs a hand down her back, "but I was hoping to figure out an alternative with my colleagues so that I may spend one of them with you. If you are agreeable, that is."

The track switches to another Ella song, one that reminds Will of Mrs. Bradley's ham recipe. An idea begins to turn in Will's head.

She tilts her head up to look into his smiling eyes. "I am agreeable."

"When do I see you again?" Hannibal asks as he always does whenever they part. And eventually, they do have to part. He has a long, snowy drive back to Baltimore and work tomorrow to prepare for. How she wishes she could monopolize his time.

"Soon," Will murmurs, "very soon," unaccustomed to the bereft sensation of wanting to keep someone close. She's never had anyone to keep this close.

"I work until Thursday. May I come to visit you again on Thursday night?" he asks, hopeful. At this rate, if Will is calculating correctly, he is spending every single one of his off days with her. She should feel guilt; instead, she feels righteous.

"I'll come to you. You shouldn't drive so far after such long shifts at work."

"Thursday it is. Come at eight," Hannibal sighs, pressing his face into her hair. "You know I adore you so."

No matter how many times he tells her, Will never tires of it. She savors the words and presses her own kisses to Hannibal's cheeks, until they truly do have to part, because he truly has to go.

Will watches his car carefully navigate the snowy path from the relative safety of her porch. After a while, when the tip of her nose begins to go numb, she gets back inside to sit by the fire. The house is quiet. The past twenty-four hours seem to her like a dream. She puts a book in her lap but doesn't remember a single word.
"Let's begin with the Texas case," Alana opens, fingers twined and resting on her lap where she sits across from Will. "Another victory for you. Another one put away, and so quickly."

"Still doesn't feel like a victory," Will shrugs. Her eyes are fixed on the wall behind Alana, where a bland landscape hangs alone. "No matter how many times I do it, it never will."

Alana takes a moment to consider. "What part of the case makes it not feel like a victory? Because you saved that girl. I would count that as a victory."

"I don't know."

"Is it because you killed a man? He was a criminal, but he was still human," Alana tries.

But Will feels no guilt about that. Will only feels a frightening amount of righteous vindication, because that man was about to hurt Hannibal. (The very thought twists her insides up.)

"No, it's just. It's never a victory because it's never as simple as win-or-lose," Will tries to explain. "It's a zero-sum game. Everybody loses, every time."

Alana takes a moment to scribble something on her pad. Nothing changes as far as her facial expression. Will can read her anyway.

_Pessimist_, Alana is thinking. _Defeatist. Mutually empathetic. Too empathetic._

"How did you feel after the case was concluded?"

"Unstable," Will answers immediately, truthfully.

"And what have you done since then to address this?"

"Find things that make me feel more stable," Will answers again with the same immediacy, almost but not quite with a mocking tone. Because what else is she supposed to do? She needs to be in one piece. Contrary to popular belief, she _wants_ to be in one piece, because there are things she would like to do in life. In order to do them, she _needs_ to be in one piece.

Alana is twirling her pen. Will knows that she is chewing on a particularly thorny question. In fact, Will can read the question right off her body language.

"Just ask it, Alana," Will sighs, uncrossing her legs and leaning forward to set her elbows on her knees. "I can practically read the words above your head."

To her credit, Alana merely smiles, wry and perhaps a little off-put. Other people would have bristled if Will read them out loud without permission.

"Dr. Lecter is one of these things that make you feel more stable," Alana surmises.

"Correct."

"He went to Houston just to see you."

"So he said."

"How does that make you feel?"
Will tilts her head and, for once, looks Alana in the eye. Perhaps Will feels more brazen because she still carries on her skin the marks from Hannibal's hands and teeth. Or perhaps she's truly gone crazy. "How does that make you feel, Alana?"

Startled by the sudden shift in tone, Alana has no immediate response.

"You knew him before I did, it seems, though we've never talked about it because you never came up in our conversations. I've only known him some months. It hasn't been that long. But he makes me feel at ease, something I think he does to people by his nature, if he lets them close enough. Your body language right now tells me that at one point in time, you were almost close enough."

Will keeps her gaze even. Alana still has no response.

"Is it going to be a conflict of interest, Alana?" Will asks. "Because if it is, we need to let Jack know so I can find another psychiatrist."

Alana swallows and inhales. "I don't see why it should be a conflict of interest."

"I do," Will tells her. "You're jealous. Angry. Uncomfortable. Confused. But you're my psychiatrist, and I'm your patient. I'm supposed to be the one with these feelings; you're supposed to be the neutral party. Right now, because I'm at my most stable in a very long time, it's the opposite. This won't work like this, Alana, you know it."

A stretch of silence settles between them. Alana is thinking, eyes now cast to an indeterminate spot on the floor. Perhaps she is unused to being the one being psychoanalyzed. Well, she knew what she was signing up for when she agreed to treat Will. Will can hardly turn her own brain off, can she? With a sigh, Alana closes her notebook. Will watches her lean back against her armchair, something like a wary resolution solidifying behind her eyes.

"I suppose you're right. I knew Hannibal long ago. He was my mentor at Johns Hopkins, when he was still a practicing psychiatrist. He was the reason I decided on psychiatry. Then he quit, and to this day I still don't understand why. We fought about it. His decision destroyed the close friendship we enjoyed. I haven't been invited to his table since then, though we've seen each other in passing. I will admit to my immense surprise when I saw him with you."

Something about her narrative strikes Will inadequate. "Surely you must have known that he would be there during the Prado exhibit," Will muses, "and yet you say you're surprised."

"It was quite a large event. The chances of you meeting each other — "

"The chances of him taking an interest in someone like me, you mean," Will amends for her. The expression of discomfort grows on Alana's face. "No, you're right; it's a very sound assumption. I wouldn't wager on the chances of him taking an interest in me. But he strives to surprise. He's an extraordinarily unpredictable man, even for me."

A spark of different interest rekindles in Alana's eyes, chasing away some of her discomfort. "Are you saying you can't read him as well as you read the rest of us?"

"You mistake my capacity as a constant variable, when it's the farthest thing from constant," Will shakes her head. "It varies from person to person; some are easier to read than others. I've lived thirty odd years with this thing, I've gotten good at reading, but Hannibal... how did we put it? Our forts are both sturdy and tall."

"You see each other as a challenge," Alana realizes.
"Maybe so. In any case, it seems he's decided that he's here to stay. So even though it's not an issue for us right now, I suspect it will be in the future. I'll need a new psychiatrist. I'm sorry, Alana."

"I'm sorry too."

But Alana can't seem to decide if she's sorry that she's losing Will as a patient, or that she's losing Hannibal as a potential partner. Will, for all her strength today, does not have the heart to tell her that she's already lost both a long time ago.

She doesn't tell Hannibal about Alana just yet. After the session, she goes home and huddles in her hot bath, nursing the pain of a fraying friendship after whatever strange strength that bolstered her earlier whittles away. Alana was her first friend in this new world, the first one who found her after she left Louisiana. Will has precious few people in her life as it is; each loss hurts.

She just has to convince herself that the trade-off is worth the pain.

"Hi," she says, eyes closed to savor the brief recorded greeting on Hannibal's voicemail. "Just wanted to hear your voice. Hope your day is okay. I'll talk to you later." Will puts her phone aside and thinks of the thickening snow outside and knows that the hospital must be busy.

After her bath, she goes to sleep on the couch downstairs. The dogs are atop her and around her, keeping her warm and secure. All the doors are locked, all the windows sealed. Everything is silent around her when she falls asleep.

Sometime later, she wakes, cold. Bewildered, she rises shivering from the couch and steps over the slumbering dogs, searching for the source of cold air. The front door is open.

Will steps outside. Snow is still falling. The stairs on her front porch are iced over, slippery under her toes. She walks above the pristine coat of snow, out and away from her house until she is all the color that disturbs the white and grey.

It's here. The beast is here, that large beast that keeps her company, the one that invades her dreams.

At the edge of the woods, it emerges once more, tall and proud, the stag with raven feathers a regal blotch against the landscape. It approaches her, breathing heavy but hooves silent, leaving no marks upon the snow. When they are face to face, Will peers into its intelligent eyes and knows that it means her no harm. She opens her arms and embraces the stag, for the first time feeling its soft, smooth feathers underneath her fingertips. Its breath is warm on the nape of her neck.

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Sometime later, she wakes again. She is still on her couch. The front door is closed. Outside, the snow is beginning to melt, frost creaking as the sun finally breaks through the cloud cover to warm up the earth. When she sits up, a single raven feather lands on her lap.

"Happy holidays!" the cashier grins, sporting a floppy Santa hat and possibly the ugliest sweater Will has ever seen in her life.

She manages a cursory greeting and hurries out the pet store as fast as humanly possible with her usual extra-large batch of dog food. Christmas music was playing from overhead, giving her a headache with its tinny, crackly quality. Just another reminder why she doesn't celebrate the season. The biting cold outside is far more welcome to her than the cloying atmosphere indoors; she doesn't even begrudge the icy sludge that makes it difficult to safely load the dog food into her trunk.

Winston and Cooper are snug in their blankets when she tucks back into the car. Two more stops, for extra gas to stock at home and then some groceries. Hard snowfall and subzero temperatures are in the forecast for the next week. Since she has nowhere else to be, she is prepared to lock herself down at home. She is only disappointed that they had to put off meeting each other next Thursday. Hannibal refused to let her drive in such inclement weather all the way to Baltimore.

"You make me want to be improper," Hannibal had sighed, "and ask you to live together with me, even though we have only known each other for so long."

Will had somehow endured the gut-wrenching want that twisted her up from the inside when she heard those words. Whatever happened to independence, to solitude, to owning her own space? Here she is, eager to always be with Hannibal, to surrender her little haven in order to have him easily at her side. Is this normal? Is this what falling in love feels like? She's supposed to be familiar with this, having seen it through the eyes of others, but it's different, it's very different, and frightening to her untried heart.

She wishes she had someone to ask, but there's no one.

Her phone rings.

"Fuck," she fumbles, digging under her coat to pull it out. She misses the call and immediately hits the return call button without even looking to see who it was. Probably Jack. "Graham, sorry, I was - -"

"Yo, girlfriend!" Beverly half-yells from the other side. Will holds the phone an inch away from her ear. "Whatsup!"

"Hi, Bev. Nothing much, just groceries."

"Prepping for the zombie apocalypse?" Beverly laughs. "That's right! Gird your loins! Winter is coming!"

It must be a reference for something that flies right over Will's head, because Beverly dissolves into a bout of smug cackling. Will just shakes her head. "Something like that, yeah."

"Girl, you didn't even get that, did you. Game of Thrones? The House of Stark? Westeros?"
"No clue. Did you need something from me? There isn't a case, is there? Jack hasn't called."

"No, doll, though I do need something from you if at all possible," Beverly hedges.

"What?"

"Well, my little brother's coming over with my parents to stay at my place for the week. He's taking the entrance exams to the law program at Georgetown. My parents are ultra-traditional to the maximum highest limit and I don't exactly relish the thought of spending potentially five snow days locked indoors in a tiny one-bedroom with them because they'll harp about grandchildren and impropriety and finding husbands and all that bullshit. So what I'm saying is — "

"You need a place to crash," Will snorts, rubbing Cooper's head to keep him from nosing at the air vent.

"Yes, exactly that. Look, I'll bring tons of food and cook bibimbap for us and we can order pizza on the worst snow day just to be assholes to the delivery guy and we can watch cheesy movies and have popcorn. We can even roast marshmallows and chestnuts and have eggnog and listen to Christmassy shit. Please? You're really the only one I can ask."

"You mean I'm the only one who would have so little going on that it wouldn't make a difference if someone crashed at my house for a whole week."

"I was trying to be nice," Beverly whines. She sounds like Buster when she whines.

"You'll be watching movies on your laptop because I don't have a TV. I'll be catching up on my books."

A shout staccatos loudly across the line. "You da best! I love you! I'm coming! You're awesome!"

They hang up and Will texts Beverly the address. When Will finally drives up to her house three hours later, Beverly's car is idling in her driveway, melting the snow. Through the car's windows, Will spies a waving Beverly and three large boxes of pizza.

"So tell me about this doctor of yours," Beverly nudges her hip to hip while folding up yet another slice of pizza. Will sighs, folding away the last empty bag of dog food into the trash. She hefts the large plastic container back into one of the lower cabinets, now restocked with enough dog food to last them about three weeks.

"He's a doctor," Will shrugs, "works at Johns Hopkins. He's a surgeon."

Will can hear Beverly roll her eyes. "Yeah, I got that, doll. Next?"

"He's incredibly smart. Very rich. I suspect old money. Not from here, originally. From somewhere in Northern Europe. He really likes me for some reason."

Beverly's resulting laughter is bright and fills up the whole kitchen. It elicits much excitement from the dogs, some of whom skitter in to sniff around their legs while they eat. Will washes her hands and picks up her fourth cheesy slice.
"How did you even meet him?" Beverly asks through a mouthful of pepperoni. "I mean, not to offend or anything, but he isn't really your, you know, type."

"No offense taken, believe me," Will snorts. "We met at a gala. Alana — Dr. Bloom — took me with her to the premiere night of a touring exhibit from Madrid last October. It was at the museum in Baltimore. Lots of fancy people. Alana had to leave early, something about a patient of hers. I stuck around and — "

"— you met the doc, I see, that makes sense. Well, Willow Graham, here I was despairing for you, but I see my despair was in vain!"

Will rolls her eyes, deigning not to grace that with a response and instead taking a vicious bite of her pizza.

After a moment of mutual silence spent devouring their greasy, cheesy slices, Beverly begins again. "Well?"

"Well what."

"Do you like him?"

Will frowns. "What kind of question is that?"

"A serious question! He may be rich and smart and suave as shit but my question is valid, you still gotta like him!" Beverly snatches another pepperoni; that's six slices for her alone. Will wonders at her svelte figure. Abnormally high metabolism, this one. "So do you?"

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"Well what."

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Will shrugs, folding an arm around herself. "I guess."

"You do!" her friend all but shrieks, delighted as though the romantic prospect was for herself. "How is he? Is he decent? Is he nice to you? Does he buy you stuff? Does he take you out?"

Mouth twisting in discomfort, Will endeavors to answer each question as obliquely as she can. "Decent is a relative concept. He's nice to everybody, that's just him. We haven't really gotten to buying each other stuff yet, but I'm sure it'll happen. And we haven't really gone out."

"Yet." Beverly points out. "Someone who attends a gala at the Baltimore Museum of Art is someone who goes out to be seen by society. I hope you're prepared, doll. He seems like a well-known, well-respected member of the elite." Beverly waves her hands around her face to mock the rich and the famous.

Will can only sigh. She doesn't relish high-powered events like that one — she doesn't relish any kind of social event full stop — but if Hannibal asks... when Hannibal asks, she'll go. She'll go because she wants to glimpse his world too, this singular man who has taken such a keen and unlikely interest in her messy, inelegant life.

"I suppose I can do it," Will mutters to herself, "with enough mental preparation." It's always the exhausting mental component for someone with her level of empathy, and never the rigors of physical preparation or the careful pleasantries. Some of the most nauseatingly vapid, egotistic personalities do thrive in high society.

"Well," Beverly heaves herself from the counter and tidies up the boxes, "I'm glad you found someone, doll. You're always alone, I worry that you'll die of an accident and no one would know until we tried to call you into work again."
Will laughs, self-deprecating. It's true; she can't deny it. But somehow, coming from Beverly the words don't sound so offensive.

"Is it because of what you do?" Beverly asks, slower now and more careful as she taps the side of her head to signify Will's gift. "Makes it hard to be with people?"

"Literally that," Will says, washing her hands again. Her hot chocolate should have cooled enough to be drinkable now. "See too much, more than people usually want me to know. Hard to make friends with people when you can tell they're bored with you or only want to befriend you because you're notorious in your field. Hard to be in a relationship when you can tell everything the other person is thinking before they even say it. There's something to be said for distance, you know... privacy of thought and all that. Can't establish trust without it. We have to pace ourselves when we're handing out our secrets."

"Does that apply with your doctor?" Beverly asks as they relocate to the living room. Instantly, they are swarmed with wagging tails and wet noses. Beverly picks up Cooper and sits by the fire.

"He's harder to read than most people," Will concedes, "which works out because I can't guess every one of his moves. But I think I'm reading him more than most people can, and it's intriguing him. If that's all, he'll be bored of me soon." I hope not, Will thinks, heart wrenching at the thought of Hannibal leaving. And they haven't even been 'together' that long yet. Are we even 'together' that way now?

"I don't think that's all, girl, you didn't see how he was looking at you," Beverly snorts. "Man like that doesn't bend over that much for any woman, especially when he knows he doesn't need to bend over for a woman. He can have anyone he likes, yeah? So why try so hard for you? There's gotta be something more than just intrigue. He must really like you."

"God, I hope so," Will murmurs, burying her face into Winston's soft fur. She tucks her feet up underneath her and cradles the large dog, folding them together in the armchair Hannibal sat on only some days ago. "It's getting so bad, you know. I want to see him all the time."

"Ah, young love," Beverly sighs, and then shrieks with more laughter when Will throws a pillow at her. "It's true! You're starstruck!"

Will can't even deny it, so she just folds up tighter with Winston and looks into the fire. Underneath her hands, Winston wheezes with canine joy, and not for the first time Will wishes her life can be as simple as his.

"When your rich doctor boyfriend gives you your Christmas gift, I wanna see it," Beverly grins, wide and catlike. "I bet it's gonna be expensive and special."

Groaning, Will drops her forehead against Winston's back. "Christmas, fuck. What do I give him?"

"The best gift you can give the most important man in your life," Beverly suggests, and when Will looks up in askance, the leer on Beverly's face is worthy of the slimiest, most perverted old man in all of history.

"You're disgusting."

"I'm being a good — ow! — supportive friend — hey!"

Will throws the last pillow at her and then stands up with indignant embarrassment. "I'm going to bed. You can sleep on the couch."
Even upstairs, she can hear Beverly's delighted cackling. Winston follows into her room and hops up on the bed after she has settled. She pulls the cover up over both of them but lays awake most of the night, wondering if there is anything at all that she could give Hannibal that the man doesn't already have. Beverly is right; there isn't much she can give beyond herself. She fights down a blush and tries to think of another way to do that without abandoning propriety altogether.

On cue, her phone pings. She reaches for it and smiles when she sees Hannibal's name. What are you doing? he asks.

Thinking about you, she types.

Then I am gratified. I only wish I were there to keep you warm.

Will smiles and turns to take a picture of Winston cuddled up in her comforter. The dog blinks and snuffles at her. She sends the picture. Winston's doing such a fine job, he might put you out of business.

It takes a while, but his response does come: Of the many firsts you have given me, this must be the most remarkable.

Will sends a single question mark.

I find myself unaccountably jealous of a dog, says Hannibal.

Letting the terribly warm and encompassing feeling expand in her chest, Will puts her face into a pillow and laughs.

Beverly ends up staying almost all of the week until the thick snow cover begins melting into slush and mud. There are no cases to be solved; the severe weather is too much even for the most determined of serial killers. As promised, Beverly catches up to all of her beloved shows while Will devours a pile of books, both of them tearing through an impressive amount of food in the meantime.

When it's time for Beverly to leave, Will exchanges a hug with her and wishes her luck with the two remaining days she will have to spend at the mercy of her "ultra-conservative to the maximum limit" parents. She almost takes Cooper with her, as attached as the dog has grown. In fact, the mutt mopes around the house after Beverly's gone, despite Will's best efforts to cheer him up.

Tomorrow is Christmas. She has thought hard about what to give Hannibal and finally came up with a solution. It's not much, but it's what she has, and it'll have to do.

In the afternoon, she braves the melting snow to shop for ingredients, driving all the way to the organic market to keep Hannibal's palate in mind. She spends an inordinate amount of money on buying only the freshest produce and feels no guilt about it when she imagines the pleasure on Hannibal's face.

Christmas morning, she begins her preparations. The pork goes on her wooden cutting board and is scored diagonally with her sharpest knife. Mrs. Bradley advises to do so in a crosshatch pattern so that's what Will does. Next, she takes a small paring knife and makes a dozen or so half-inch-deep cuts in the meat to allow the seasonings to permeate.
The seasonings are not the usual glaze of a traditional Christmas dinner; it's a southern-style blend Mrs. Bradley used to make for her in Louisiana. Will throws the garlic, onions, jalapenos, and oregano into a food processor to get them very finely chopped. Cumin and chile powder are added for more spice; salt and pepper; another thirty seconds to make a thick paste. Vinegar and olive oil too; yet another thirty seconds. She takes the paste and rubs it into the meat, fingers coating all surfaces including the sides and the bottom.

With messy hands, she places the pork in a large toasting pan, fat side up, and pours two cups of a fine Californian dry white over it. Foil over the pan and she puts it in the oven to roast for two and a half hours.

Meanwhile, she prepares the garlic mashed potatoes, another staple from Mrs. Bradley, as well as the homemade cranberry sauce for the pork and some roasted vegetables. She takes time to roast the vegetables over an actual fire, blackening some edges to give it that smoky taste. She checks on the pork and at two and a half hours removes the foil, putting it back in the oven to roast for another four to five hours until the meat is very, very tender. In between, she adds cups of wine to keep the pan moist.

Everything is ready by the afternoon. She leaves the kitchen to take a thorough shower, grooming herself with care and attention that she is only now becoming accustomed to. The cold weather doesn't allow her much leeway with clothing, but she applies makeup and does a better job at it than she thought she was able. It's too cold to put up her hair; she just tries to make it as neat as possible. She chooses the warmest black leggings she has, her nicest pair of winter boots that come up to cover her calves, and an overlarge knit sweater that slips on over a thermal long-sleeved shirt. The color matches Hannibal's scarf which he left behind, so she wears that too.

*What are you doing?* she texts him while loading the food into her car.

*Enduring my resident's glucose-induced enthusiasm for the holiday*, Hannibal responds.

*How many slices of cake has she had?* Will smiles, checking the doors and latching the windows, pouring water for the dogs, checking that the dog food dispenser is full and that the timer is set.

*Too many. But she seems to be the only one who has consumed enough caffeine to match the amount of sugar she has eaten; everyone else is in a glucose-induced stupor.*

*You're not busy?* Will asks as she ducks into the welcome warmth of her car.

*Steady. My resident has enough energy to keep everything well in hand.*

That is the last Will hears of him for a while, as she eases her car into the slush-covered roads. The freeway is blissfully deserted, affording her an altogether pleasant ride to Baltimore. She takes her time, assured that Hannibal will still be there when she arrives. It's early evening when she pulls into the hospital's parking garage. The place looks mostly empty.

Will slings the large insulated food container over her shoulder and trudges through cracked frost and slush, across the street and towards the hospital's front doors. Sleek modern lines combine with an old red brick facade, giving the institution a handsome exterior. Indoors, it is temperate and quiet. She is welcomed at the front desk and summarily directed to a hallway leading down towards the emergency department.

The emergency lobby is relatively calm, with only a few people waiting to be called in. She comes up to the front desk. *"Merry Christmas, how can I help you?"* the nurse asks, blinking blearily up at her face. *Too much cake,* Will thinks.
"Here to see Dr. Lecter, please. Not a patient."

"Oh," the nurse blinks again, pausing for a moment before she reaches toward the wall and hits a button. The double doors beside the welcome desk hiss open. "Go on in, straight down the hallway and to the right, ask at the nurse's desk. He's probably there."

"Thank you," Will murmurs, ducking quickly down the hallway before the nurse wakes up enough to ask questions. Alas, she is out of luck, because all the nurses at the main emergency desk look relaxed and attentive, cups of coffee steaming in their hands. About seven of them are spread around chatting leisurely with each other when Will approaches the desk. There is a miniature Christmas tree in a corner, strung with tiny flickering lights and surrounded by tiny elves and reindeer. The station itself is lined with gold and red garlands. Behind the counter, someone's phone is playing Michael Bublé.

"Hi," Will greets. They pause their chattering, a friendly blonde nurse turning to her with a smile.

"Hello! Are you looking for a patient?"

"Uhh, no, I'm actually here to see Dr. Lecter?" Will tries hard not to fidget, because now everyone is looking at her, even the clerk behind the telemetry monitors and the tech over there who was just a while ago wiping down a stretcher. "I'm not a patient."

"Oh. Oh! Of course, one moment," the nurse rolls towards a computer and fires it up, navigating to a screen and typing a short message in. "I'm paging him for you, he'll be here shortly. Shall I leave a name?"

Nice try, Will smiles. "No, it's alright."

The nurses are all visibly disappointed. One of them was just typing something into her phone. Will can feel the gossip mill whirring to sudden life on an otherwise calm Christmas evening in the hospital. She almost wishes for a car accident or a heart attack to send them all scuttling to work, but then she wouldn't be able to enjoy Hannibal's company as much, so she supposes it's a fair trade off. Shortly, an older nurse with a plump figure and a stern expression hustles out of what looks like a stock room, stopping only to give Will a once over.

"Well, young lady, you're too healthy to be here today," she remarks, hand on one hip and another resting on the counter.

"Robbie, she's not a patient, she's here for Dr. Lecter," one of the nurses interject, a brown-haired girl who looks altogether too young to be a nurse.

"Oh!" Robbie raises both eyebrows. "Well, have we paged Dr. Lecter?"

"Done," the blonde one says, toasting Robbie with her coffee cup.

"Good," Robbie nods, returning to look at Will with evaluating eyes. It's almost as if Will is being judged. "Bit unusual for 'im to have a guest. What brings you around, young lady?"

"Food," Will smiles, gesturing to the large, ungainly container slung across her shoulder. "Since he has to work today."

"Well!" Robbie exclaims in surprise. "Someone bringing Dr. Lecter food! Why, he usually brings us food. He brought us some today, in fact. Don't know where the man finds the time. Don't think he ever takes a day off."
The nurses collectively laugh and murmur their assent. The brown-haired girl is about to say something when a sing-song voice calls out towards them.

"Guuu~uuuys! What are you doing, paging sensei? I'm here, aren't I? Do we have new staff I haven't met yet? You guys know to page me for anything!"

A small, dark-haired figure in blue scrubs underneath a long white coat prances down the far hallway towards them, skidding to a stop a few meters before Will. The girl's eyes widen with almost comical flair as she gasps.

"Agent Graham!"

*This must be the favorite resident.* Will nods. "Hello. You must be Yuriko."

"Yes, I am, hold on, SENSEI, HAYAKU."

"Please refrain from shouting, Reizei-kun, this is a hospital," chides a familiar voice. Will spies him coming down the hallway, tall and immaculate as always, decked in his white coat. Hannibal sights her and his face softens, almost imperceptible but for the way the corners of his eyes lift and crinkle. He picks up his pace and heads straight for her, stepping past Yuriko and leaning down to give Will's cheek a soft kiss. "What a pleasant surprise. Hello, darling."

Will fights down a blush and murmurs a greeting, conscious of all the eyes watching them.

"Now, hold on a minute," someone loudly says, eliciting laughter and scattered claps from around the nurse's station. Robbie, the elderly nurse, puts both hands on her hips and frowns up at Hannibal. "Young man, you never told us you had a young lady of your own! And here we are throwing ourselves at you!"

"Just you, Robbie," says one of the nurses, a bespectacled guy who grins as everyone laughs at his comment.

"Shut up and finish your charting," Robbie snaps at him, before turning back to Hannibal. "Well, won't you at least introduce us?"

Hannibal, obviously pleased to be able to show her off, indulges the request. "Will, these are my always-reliable, cheerful nurses. Without their capable hands helping mine, there would be no hope for our patients. Everyone, this is Will. She is a remarkable, intelligent woman whom I have been attempting to persuade of my good nature for the past few months, though I'm not certain I'm succeeding, because she's too smart to be so easily fooled." Everyone laughs again; Will ducks behind her -- no, Hannibal's -- scarf.

Hannibal continues. "Yuriko, Will," he motions, and in a traditional show of respect, Yuriko clicks her feet together, folds her hands on her thighs, and bows down from her waist. When she straightens back up, her grin is blinding.

"Hi, Agent Graham! I'm Yuriko Reizei! Ari's told me so much about you! Thank you for taking care of her!"

"Uh, there's no need for all that, Will is fine. And Miss Black hardly needs any care from me, really."

True to Hannibal's words, Yuriko is bouncing on her heels, vibrating with enough energy to power the whole department. Thankfully, Hannibal steps in, perhaps sensing that Will is woefully out of her depth.
"If you'll excuse us," he ushers Will towards the hallway he came from, "we'll be in my office. I am available at any time, just page."

"Of course!" Yuriko nods brightly, hanging behind with the nurses, wearing a catty grin that reminds Will of Beverly. "I got this, sensei, you take your time catching up!"

Hannibal nods to the nurses as they move away. Halfway down the hall, Will fusses with the scarf around her neck and mutters, "Why do I have a feeling the whole hospital will know I was here by the morning?"

"Oh, it hardly takes them that long," Hannibal smiles. "The gossip should circulate by midnight. The grapevine is quite efficient even in an institution this big."

"Gee, thanks," Will scowls.

"Would you like me to stop them from talking?" Hannibal asks, opening a door for her through which she blindly steps. "I can, if you'd like. I've worked long enough with them that they will respect my wishes despite their urge to gossip."

Will is almost tempted to say yes, except she stops and wonders at the point of doing so. This is the goal, she reminds herself. A sustained relationship. And such a relationship never flourishes when it's hidden.

"No," she sighs, turning to meet his gaze. "It's fine. They can talk. It doesn't matter."

Hannibal smiles at her and leans in for a kiss. There are no words for a moment. He holds her hip in one hand and cradles her skull with the other, angling their lips just so to allow a deep taste. He smells of warmth and his cologne, coffee on his tongue, perhaps a hint of chocolate. They did say he brought food for the nurses today. Perhaps he brought them the cake Yuriko has been eating. Likely it's chocolate he made himself.

When she surfaces from the kiss, only then does she realize that they are in his office. It's a large office befitting that of a senior staff, with wide windows overlooking the nearly empty street outside. His desk is on one side of the room, large and made of regal mahogany, backed with shelves lined with books and a handful of display items. In front of it are two matching chairs. There is a computer angled diagonally towards the desk's occupant and facing away from the door. A recliner draped with a large maroon fleece blanket is set along the window. On the other end of the room are more shelves, a small refrigerator, a counter with coffee implements, and a long couch that might convert into a sofabed. There is also a closed narrow closet, perhaps to hang blazers and whitecoats and the like.

"It's like you brought your house to the hospital," Will smiles, running fingers over the surface of the desk. "This looks just like the one in your study."

"It is a replica," Hannibal smiles, taking the food container from her. "It seems you have brought me something, but I will still endeavor to ask what brings you all the way to Baltimore tonight."

"I wanted to see you," Will smiles. "We said we'd spend at least one of the holidays together, didn't we?"

Hannibal's smile grows. "Yes, we did."

"So I made us a holiday dinner," Will says, unzipping the food container and looking into the contents within. "It's not much but — "
"It's wonderful," Hannibal interrupts, taking her hand and kissing it before seizing the food container to spread it out himself. "We shall enjoy it together. Here, come, sit. Perhaps some coffee or tea?"

They clear part of his desk and lay out the food, which is still very warm and indeed appetizing. Will brought dishes and cutlery too, the best she owns, knowing that Hannibal would better appreciate the meal when laid out on a proper plate. Somehow, the image of Hannibal eating out of a tupperware container is plainly wrong.

Will flushes with pleasure when Hannibal openly admires her cooking. "It's not much," she says again, but he hushes her and tests the pork.

His face opens and warms as they eat. Will gains so much pleasure watching him savor the food she has made, and she has to wonder if it's the same for him whenever she eats his food. The effort is all worth it when Hannibal makes a soft sound of appreciation at the mashed potatoes.

"Masterfully done. Mrs. Bradley's recipe?" he asks, to which Will pinkens and laughs.

"Yep. The pork too. I hope it isn't too spicy."

"It's very well done," Hannibal compliments again. "A perfect mixture of spices. Cumin and jalapeno? Soaked and roasted in Pinot Grigio, perhaps?"

"How can you even tell that," Will shakes her head. She finishes her plate and sets it aside, mopping her lips with a napkin and shuffling her feet. So far there have been no calls for him. Perhaps his resident, Yuriko, is fielding the calls to allow them time. "I think there should be enough for your resident too."

"Though she's been well-fed tonight, I'm sure she will appreciate it," Hannibal ruefully agrees. "The nurses, though they are nurses, have a penchant for bringing only the sweetest, fattiest, most unhealthy foods that they can bring. I can't profess to understand it. They should know better."

"They know better, which is precisely why they don't eat healthy," Will points out. "They know how much they can get away with, and how you can die at any point in time, so they endeavor to enjoy the little things while they can."

"Spoken from experience, my dear?"

"I was a beat cop at one point, you know," Will shrugs, watching him finish the last bit of his slice of pork with relish. "Had to start at the lowest spot on the totem pole. Most of us would do the same thing. Indulge when we can, because we saw the worst things that can happen to people, and they usually happened without warning. Can you blame us?"

"Yes and no," Hannibal sighs, leaning back in his chair with an air of immense satisfaction. Will allows herself to think it's because she's here to keep him company, she's here to bring him food. "I understand the mentality, but at its root, it is flawed. The finest things in life often require much effort and cannot be enjoyed when one is inebriated from alcohol or stuporous from too much sugar. There is a balance that must be struck for one to keep a keen mind."

"Some people," Will wryly points out, "would like to not keep a keen mind sometimes."

Hannibal tips his head in acknowledgment. "There is something to be said for the release found in disinhibition, but I am not much for it."

"A man like you, no," Will shakes her head with a smile.
Hannibal leans forward again, elbows on the desk between them. "And tell me, darling, what exactly is a man like myself?"


"I won't deny it," Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "Well?"

"Control," Will tells him, "you are a man of complete control. Disinhibition would not sit well with you. You like to bend the world to your will, and in order to do so, you must have a clear, sharp mind. That's the kind of man you are. That's what you covet. A clear, sharp mind."

Hannibal smiles. "Precise as always. I covet a mind like yours, my darling."


"Do you feel unclear, Will?"

"Is that you asking as a psychiatrist or as my... god, it sounds so wrong to call you boyfriend," Will laughs again, embarrassed. She wishes the scarf were still around her neck so she could hide behind it. As such, it hangs with her coat on a peg on the wall, having been plucked away earlier by a smiling Hannibal while they readied the food. "What do I call you? My lover?" she laughs again. "That sounds even more absurd."

"Does it?" Hannibal hums, taking her hand and holding it. "Well, we are partners, perhaps, if that term sits well with you."

"Partners," Will murmurs, looking at their twined hands with blurry eyes.

"No? Shall we look for another term?"

Once, perhaps twice, when she was very young and her mother was still with them, she dreamed of one day finding herself a constant companion. She tells Hannibal as much. "The kind you read about in books, you know," Will says, "someone that would always be there in every adventure, taking every step with you. Someone to count on in times of trouble. Someone to enjoy simple moments with. I was young, what can I say. Maybe it's just wishful thinking."

"Partners," Hannibal insists again, with a firmer tone this time, as he straightens in his seat. "I will be yours if you will be mine."

A softer, private smile grows on Will's face. "One would think you were proposing marriage, doctor."

"I would, except I don't think you're quite ready for that yet, my dear."

The smile freezes on her face. She blinks in surprise. "You would?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Why?"

"The fact that you even ask," he sighs, "is a sign that you are not yet ready. So I shall withhold my question and wait until you see. I am an exceedingly patient man, Willow Graham, and my patience can and will outlast your stubbornness."

Will blinks up at him, blindsided and confused. He merely smiles and brushes his knuckles against her cheekbones. His eyes are warm, the fine lines around them crinkling just so for her. She may just
believe him.

There are few words from her after that, but Hannibal doesn't push her — *never* pushes her — and seems to understand. They pack away the remnants of the food, putting empty ceramic tupperwares and dirty dishes back into her container. Yuriko gets a plate of pork and grilled vegetables and a small serving of garlic mashed potatoes. When all that is done, they sit together on the couch, Will shucking off her boots and tucking herself against Hannibal's body, face turned into his neck. He rests his cheek upon the crown of her head and holds her just so, radiating warmth and acceptance the likes of which Will has never felt in her entire life.

When it comes time for her to leave, it is even harder than the last time they parted. They share kiss after excruciatingly tender kiss before walking out of his office. Hannibal promises to be with her on the first day he is off. Will renews her offer to drive to Baltimore and save him the effort. It's not like she has anything better to do; semester doesn't start for another few weeks.

He walks her to the parking garage and gives her one last kiss before she tucks into her car. "I really hope you liked the food," Will murmurs into his shoulder, sighing. "I didn't know what to get you for Christmas so I thought — I mean, I know you enjoy food and — it was simple fare, but — "

"It is the first time someone has made for me a home-cooked Christmas meal since I was a child," Hannibal confesses into her hair, "and it is the first time I am celebrating the day with family since I was a young man in Paris. Thank you for a wonderful gift, Will. It is cherished and will be remembered always."

Her empathy picks up on the resonating truth with his words. More and more now, her fear of seeing Hannibal through the lenses of her empathy is disappearing, because he shows her nothing but affection and truth, so unlike everyone else in the world. How fortunate she is to have found him. How stupid of her if she even thinks to let go.

Tightening her grip one last time, she pecks his cheek and disentangles from his arms. Hannibal closes the door behind her as she ducks into the car. He begins walking back towards the hospital, and when she pulls out of the garage, she sees him standing right there by the curb, watching her slowly drive away, raising an arm in goodbye, visible in her rearview mirror.

She tries to imagine that this is the last time she will see him, and the force of grief that wrenches her gut makes her recoil from the very thought. That, more than anything, tells her this is it. She's in too deep. She has no choice but to keep going forward with him, and if it ends, it will end badly. It will tear her into ragged pieces and bleed her dry. But somehow the thought of that is better than walking away from him, than leaving this behind.

Better to have loved and lost, was it? But no, Mrs. Bradley's advice is better. Will pulls carefully into the freeway and smiles, tuning her radio to some jazz.

*When you love something and you want it, you fight for it,* Mrs. Bradley once told her. *But sometimes life's strange and gives you it for free. When that happens, you don't be questioning your good fortune. You just take it and run, Willow. You just take it and run.*

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY HOLIDAYS, FANNIBALS! I HOPE YOU ENJOYED THAT.
NOW GIRD YOUR LOINS; WINTER IS COMING.
(And by that, I mean encephalitis.)
les bijoux

Chapter by iluxia

Chapter Summary

In which sex happens with encephalitis.
Also known as: Will Graham needs your help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The invitation comes just as Beverly said it would, its vivid blood-red ink glistening against fine golden paper. Will runs her fingers against it, the pads of her thumbs and the tips of her nails, marvelling at the smoothness and weight of it. Unreal.

*If you would allow me the distinct pleasure of your company*, Hannibal writes, as if Will could ever refuse, and attached is the formal invitation to the black tie occasion.

*Opera*, Will wonders to herself. *I'm being invited to the opera.* She calls Beverly just to make sure she isn't dreaming.

"Oh my god, Willow Graham," Beverly whisper-shrieks, "are you fucking with me right now."

"No, and is there a reason you're whispering?" Will asks, putting the note down on the kitchen table to pick up her coffee.

"The nice ass I picked up last night is still asleep," Beverly blithely confesses, "and he was good enough of a tumble that I can be nice for once. Now *take a picture!*"

"A picture of what?"

"The invitation!"

"Bev, it's just an invitation."

"From rich and handsome Dr. Debonair! To the opera! With you!" she exclaims. "I want to see it. Let me see it. Pics or it didn't happen!"

Obligingly, Will takes one, returning to the phone call as soon as she's sent the text message. On the other side, Beverly makes obscene gurgling noises of delight.

"Have you called him yet? Make sure you ask what colour he's wearing so you can coordinate!"

Speaking of which, Will groans. "I don't have anything remotely appropriate to wear to something like this. And I haven't said I'm going!"

Beverly makes a noise of aggravated frustration. "Girl, are you fucking serious right now. You. Are. Going. Of course you're going! You can't refuse him! You shouldn't!"

"I shouldn't," Will echoes, toying with the fine paper again. Her one foot is rubbing Cooper's flank
up and down, but she's not sure which one of them is requiring the comfort, herself or the dog. Cooper already looks plenty comfortable on the rug.

"What you should do," Beverly tells her, "is call him right now and thank him for the invitation. Tell him you're going. Ask him what colour he's wearing. Now. Right now. Hang up on me, Graham. Do it."

Will laughs at Beverly's ridiculous antics. "Alright, fine," she acquiesces, hitting the End Call button and swiping to find Hannibal's name. At a thought, she programs him into her speed dial, and before she can question her decision, she presses Call, her stomach pulling into tight pretzel knots at the thought of the opera.

*The opera. What the fuck even.*

"Will," he answers, her name always uttered with the cadence of a smile. "Good morning, darling."

"The opera," she blurts out, apparently unable to control herself today. "You want me to go with you to the opera."

Hannibal, as always, takes it in stride. "I would very much delight in the pleasure of your company. I hope you will allow me to introduce you to one of my singular pleasures in life."

Will twiddles with the note and clears her throat. "I don't... I don't do well with crowds, Hannibal. I mean, what I mean to say is, I'm, uhm, I may not be the kind of company you want to keep."

"Of course you are," he gently rebukes.

"I don't want to embarrass you," Will hurriedly says, before he can roll over all of her reservations, a feat he is entirely too capable of. "I don't want to make the wrong impression to your friends."

"What they think is of no matter to me," Hannibal tells her, tone now firmer and more insistent. "They are nowhere near as valuable as you. It is your company I want on this night, not theirs. And dear Will, you would never be an embarrassment to me. On the contrary."

"You're just flattering me."

"I am telling the truth," he says, "just as we had promised."

Will holds herself and curls over the edge of the table, leaning forward on her elbows. If she pushes any further, she fears she may push him away forever. Her gut wrenches at the very thought. What's one night spent doing something he loves in exchange for his presence in her life? So many things he's given her, so much he's done for her—can she not accompany him for one night? It's just the opera.

"...I have nothing to wear," Will whispers hoarsely into the phone, her acquiescence still uncomfortable but nonetheless freely given.

She can feel him relax and smile. "About that," he hums, and Will has to groan in mortification.

"Oh no you didn't."

"Yes, in fact, I did," Hannibal smugly responds. "All the seamstress requires is a half-hour's worth of your time for your measurements. Sometime this week, perhaps, to give them ample time."

"Hannibal, you don't have to—I can't—"
"A gift," Hannibal insists, voice soft as it wraps around Will's shoulders in a warm embrace. "This is a gift for you, mylimasis. I bid you take it and wear it for me. Will you wear it for me?"

And damn it all, if he puts it like that, how can Will possibly refuse? Face burning, she makes a noise of assent and somehow conducts the rest of the call in a light-headed daze, agreeing to a Saturday afternoon to meet the seamstress, and then dinner.

When they hang up, it is all Will can do to gather Cooper in her arms and collapse in a disordered heap by the fire, where she remains curled and wondering what an impossible fairytale her life has become. She closes her eyes and listens to her stuttering heart, its rhythm unknown, its speed making it hard for her to breathe. This is what falling feels like.

The year ends with another blizzard, this one more blinding than the last. The forecast warns that it will shut down most of the northeastern seaboard, but their Saturday afternoon appointment for the seamstress is thankfully scheduled before the worst of it begins to blanket Baltimore. Just to be certain, she entreats Beverly to stay at her place and watch the dogs overnight, in the event that Will is unable to drive home.

"Of course you'll be unable to drive home," Beverly grins. "You'll be all wrapped up in Dr. Debonair's loving arms!"

"Shut up," Will sighs, shouldering the bag she's packed with enough clothes to last her for several days. "First-aid kit in the bathroom. Another one under the third cabinet in the kitchen. There's an emergency kit in there too. A third fire extinguisher in the garage, and some heavier tools if you need them. Dry firewood under the tarp, gasoline in the large red jugs, an extra cooler full of frozen fish. If for any reason the power goes out, stay in the living room and close all the curtains to insulate the room. It gets nice and toasty if you get the fire roaring."

"My god," Beverly shakes her head, "you're like one of those zombie apocalypse doomsday preppers."

They both pause, and then Will turns to a cabinet in the living room.

"Shotgun is here, rounds in the bottom—"

"I was joking, Will Graham, holy shit!"

"I wasn't. I live out here by myself, Bev," laughs Will, "and there are times I get snowed in. Sometimes there are wild things out there too."

"What kind of things?"

"Oh, you know," Will shrugs. "Foxes, mostly, some wild dogs, occasional wolves. Ready game, so you'll never be hungry."

"Eh, wolves, I can handle wolves," Beverly flaps her hand. "Wolves are nothing next to crazy people, and I've shot down some truly crazy ones."

Will gives another short, aborted laugh. "I know. I was there for one of them."
"No zombies, though, right?" Beverly asks.

"Well, no people for miles..."

"Willow Graham!"

Beverly is still shouting abuse at her even as she pulls away from the house. The clouds roll ominously above her head, grey and gravid with the promise of precipitation. None as of yet, however, so she hurries along, hoping that Hannibal won't mind her being a little early.

Throughout the drive, she glances fondly at the apple pie sitting beside her, another page brought to life from Mrs. Bradley's cookbook. She hopes Hannibal will like it. Likely he can make a better one, but the thought of making something for him to eat gives Will a warmth and a thrill she is quickly growing to love. She drives fast enough through the weekend traffic that when she pulls into an empty spot down the street from his house, the pie is still warm in her hands.

There goes the next-door maid again, the European girl with narrow, pinched features peeking out from between the curtains to look at her. Will smiles at her this time, but the girl frowns back, shutting the curtains with a decidedly unfriendly jerk of her hand.

"Will, darling," Hannibal smiles, opening the door for her to pass through. He takes the pie from her and momentarily puts it down to assist her out of her coat and scarf. When he has her all unravelled, he immediately swoops in for a kiss, hands pulling her close to tuck against his body in the most covetous of ways. His breath is warm, so warm against her ice-cold cheeks. Heat spreads like wildfire from where their lips have met, across her face and down her throat and over the broad planes of her chest, until all she can feel is a narcotic liquid warmth. It makes her want to sink.

Eventually they do part, though slowly and with much reluctance. Hannibal runs a thumb across her lower lip and smiles at her just so, a smile so small and private it can only be seen through the crinkle at the edge of his eyes and the slight lift of his brows.

"Come along, let me retire your pie in the kitchen and brew you some tea," he bids her.

"Are we not going to your seamstress in, um, fifteen minutes?"

"No," Hannibal answers, curving an arm behind her shoulders. "She is here for you."

"Oh," Will blinks. "I should have expected that, shouldn't I."

Hannibal chuckles. "It is of no matter. Ah, apples. Excellent. It will pair well with our pork for this evening." They enter his sitting room and true enough his seamstress is waiting. "Will, this is Signora Sineni, a long-time friend of mine. Signora, this is Will, whom I've told you about."

"Hello, very good to meet you," Will quietly greets, shaking hands with the signora, who is taller than her, sharply slender, and darker-haired. The signora's eyes are also dark and deep-set, smoky in that unique Mediterranean way. Will can't help but feel like she's being measured more than just for clothes.

"An honour," Signora Sineni returns, dipping her head and placing a palm on her chest. Her accent is either a soft Italian or a harsh French.

"I'm sure the honour's mine," Will demurs, "to be wearing one of your dresses."

It is the correct thing to say; Signora Sineni smiles. "Kind words I shall have to live up to."
Hannibal offers both of them a pleased smile and excuses himself. "I shall be in the kitchen tending to some details for dinner. If you require anything, please let me know; otherwise, I will close the doors behind me and allow you some privacy for the measurements."

In short order, Will is left alone with the seamstress, who has her tools laid out on the table before them but begins instead by taking Will's hands. "Will you turn for me, Ms. Graham? Yes, just so. And show me how you walk. Towards the door and back, normally. Grazie. You don't seem to wear skirts often," Signora Sineni notes.

"No," Will laughs, self-deprecating. "Usually gets in the way in my line of work."

"Perhaps because you weren't wearing the right kind," the seamstress points out. "If you will remove your clothes, please, so that I may measure with accuracy. I shall try to be as quick and economical as possible, and I will tell you where I touch."

"Uhh, underwear off too?" Will asks, because she has never done anything like this before. Her underwear is from Walmart and her clothes from a sale at Target. She's almost embarrassed.

"You may keep your undergarments on. Have you ever had a dress made for your body before?"

"No," Will admits. "Too expensive, usually."

Signora Sineni makes a soft sound of understanding. "Each piece I make is a piece of art created to fit and flow with the contours and movements of your body. But it is only a piece of the art, not the whole of it. You constitute the rest. So I must ask that you be honest with me when you see the finished product, because if you do not like it for any reason at all, it will show. The effect will not be wholesome. The dress must be an extension of you, which I understand can be difficult when the design is not wholly yours, but that is why I will ask you some questions. They may seem strange but they will help me create a vision of what you would wear well."

"Okay," Will says. She steps out of her jeans and folds them over the arm of the couch. "Fire away."

"How do you feel about this event you are attending with Dr. Lecter?" the signora asks, beginning to measure Will with the tape.

"Anxious," Will answers at once.

"How come?"

"Never been to the opera. Never met his friends. I don't do well with people. Especially not lots of people."

"And if you were to put a colour to anxiety," the seamstress continues without pause, "what would it be?"

"Brown," Will answers again, "but not the colour of wood. A burnished brown that has a bit of copper in it. If you put it under the right light, it almost shines golden. Almost like—almost like dried blood," she grimaces.

Signora Sineni nods, continuing to measure. "Look behind the anxiety. What is feeding the anxiety?"

Will thinks for a moment, obeying quietly when her arm is positioned just so. "Fear, I think. Of disappointing Hannibal."

"And if you were to visualize this fear, what shape or form would it take?"
Knots, tangles, webs. They churn and tighten and expand, crawling over her like vines on a branch. She says as much to the signora. "Sometimes they coil so tight I can hardly breathe. Sorry; I do have an anxiety disorder..."

"Quite alright," Signora Sineni dismisses, rightly so as it is none of her business. "But you say they are like vines... if they were originating from a centerpoint, where would that be on your body?"

Will puts a hand above her stomach by reflex, right where the bifurcation would be on a Y-sectioned corpse.

"Very good. Place your arm here, please, thank you. Now," the signora continues, looking up at her with warm eyes, "I apologize for the personal nature of this next question in advance, but bear with me, please. If you had to put a colour to your relationship with Dr. Lecter—"

"Red," Will answers immediately and almost without thought. "A deep, dark red."

Signora Sineni smiles. "You are quite good at giving me the answers I need."

Will flushes. "I'm trying."

"Thank you. And one last question," the signora says, "if Dr. Lecter were an animal, what would he be?"

It takes her a while to answer, not because it is difficult to find an answer, but because it is too easy. The answer walks right in front of her, literally. The stag, her stag, walks into the room, hooves making quiet, muted thuds on the carpet. Its raven feathers glisten under lamplight when it makes a turn behind the seamstress. Without looking at her, it stops near the crackling hearth and lifts its kingly crown of antlers to the ceiling, where it gores a hole through the white plaster and showers its black countenance with fine white dust.

"Ms. Graham?"

"A black stag," Will murmurs, "with a full crown of antlers reaching up into the sky."

"Very good. Take your left foot and make a half-step out, please, thank you."

The measurements continue in silence but Will pays it no heed. Her stag has materialized from her dreams and is now investigating the artwork on the wall, a set of sketches of some European streets, a painting of a setting sun, a framed paper flower. She blinks several times to make sure she hasn’t actually fallen asleep again, but no, it feels real enough. The signora's hands are cold.

"We are finished," Signora Sineni declares after a short while spent in mutual silence. "You may put your clothes back on."

"Thank you," Will murmurs, stepping back into her jeans and shrugging into her sweater. There are goosebumps on her arm from the stag's raven feathers brushing up against her. She makes no acute motion to acknowledge its presence even as walks around her and nudes its cold nose against her jaw.

"The dress should be ready for fitting in two and a half weeks. If the fit requires no further adjustments at that time, then I shall relinquish it to you. But if we find corrections that need to be made, I should take no more than a day or two to make them."

Will smiles at her, eyes dipping down to observe the mother-of-pearl necklace resting on the signora's collarbones. "I'm sure the dress will be perfect, signora."
A thin finger crooks under her jaw and gently lifts her face up, startling her enough that she holds her breath. "Eyes up, young lady," the signora tells Will, dark eyes glittering with wisdom and not a small bit of amusement. "If you are worthy of the doctor's singular regard, you should keep those beautiful blue eyes of yours looking up."

Will bites her lip to prevent herself from saying something stupid. (She always does, in these types of situations.)

The signora sits down and begins tucking her tools back into her bag, which looks to be handmade and of course incredibly stylish in a classic sort of way. "I have been making pieces for Dr. Lecter for many years, but this is the first instance he has asked me to make one for a chosen companion. I begin to see, though, what it is that draws the signor to you."

Will sits down too, wrapping her arms around herself and peering over the list of numbers the signora has written down in her small notebook. "Perhaps you may enlighten me, then."

"Do I need to?" Signora Sineni pauses, looking up at Will again. "Ah, I see that I do. Well, Miss Graham," she says, lips twisted in a secretive little smile, "an artist's heart always longs, and grows quickly intoxicated when it finds a rare kinship in another. You may not be what everyone in society expects the signor to have at his side, but you are exactly what I have always thought he needed."

Will blinks in surprise. "Really?"

"Truly," the signora nods, now adjusting to sit more comfortably to take a sip of her tea. Her tools are all tucked away, including her notes and pencils. "I have known him since he was a young man in Italy. I was just a tailor's apprentice then. The first time I met him, I thought, Ah. This one needs an equal to stand at his side. Otherwise, he would grow tired of them, leave them behind."

"And I'm that equal," Will says, dubiously.

"You already know the answers to your questions, Miss Graham. You simply want to hear me confirm them."

"Forgive me, signora," Will blinks, vision blurring momentarily as the stag nudges the back of her head, "for oftentimes I doubt myself."

Oblivious to the third presence in the room, Signora Sineni puts down her teacup with a quiet clink and a smile. "And that is why you are perfect for him. You are the doubt in his certainty. One cannot exist without the other. Don't you see?"

Don't you see? her voice echoes in Will's head. See?

Her golden pendulum swings, her perception blasting into full force as her control slips. At once, she sees the signora's many past lives: the heady breezes of her childhood spent under faraway Corsican stars, the bright suns of her young years in Rome and Milan and Lisbon and Barcelona. The smoke-filled dark salons in Paris, the years of high and reckless living, the art. Beauty she has produced with the toil of her bare hands.

Will forcibly screws her eyes shut, taking a slow breath. In the periphery, she hears Hannibal knock and open the door once more.

"I hope I am not disturbing," he says. Will can hear the smile in his soft tone. He is happy today. Content.

"Not so; we were simply chatting," the signora says, standing up. "Well, I have finished my
measurements and have all that I need to begin the work. I should be heading back before I overstay my welcome."

"You know you are always welcome here, Silvia," Hannibal bids, escorting her all the same to the foyer. Will follows after them, smoothing her hands on her jeans and hoping that she didn't make too terrible of an impression. Hannibal seems to hold the signora in high regard. "Until next time, my dear."

They exchange a cheek-to-cheek, and before Will knows it, she is gathered up into one as well. Will thanks Silvia Sineni again and watches her from the door as she makes her way down the street where the snow is now falling in thick, fat clumps. As soon as Hannibal closes the door, Will exhales, sagging against the wall.

Hannibal chuckles. "Was she so intimidating?"

"I just didn't want to make a bad impression," Will sighs. "I'm not very good at people." Pausing, she amends, "I'm not very good at making nice with people, I should say."

"I daresay you did just fine," Hannibal gathers her under one arm, pulling her close and guiding her back inside. "Silvia seemed quite impressed with you."

"You used to date her. What happened?" Will asks in what she would like to call a spirit of pure curiosity even though that's a lie. She's also a wee bit jealous.

Hannibal, of course, picks up on it. "Surely you don't think of her as a threat." Will flushes. "It was a long time ago. We were different people in a different world. I met her in Firenze, during one summer when I decided to escape Paris for a time. I was acquiring my premedical degree and, as you might imagine, I was quite bored. She was interesting and vibrant; she had an eye for the arts. We had plenty to talk about. But ultimately we were looking for different things in life and parted as friends. I was very pleasantly surprised to find her many years later when I moved here. She divides her time between Washington, where she has many clients, and New York. In the summers, she is in Europe, designing haute couture. She is quite highly respected in her field now, a far cry from how we both were as young people."

"Living the high life on smoke and alcohol and sex?" Will chuckles. "I can easily imagine it. You know that Beverly calls you Dr. Debonair? You fit the image too easily."

"Everyone has to make at least a few questionable decisions in life," Hannibal shrugs, pulling her into yet another hug. He sets his face against her hair and pulls a deep inhale, as if intent to ingrain the very smell of her into memory. For a moment, he is quiet, hand spanning up and down across her back. And then he asks, "Are you feeling quite well, darling? You smell feverish."

Will does feel cold today. She looks out through the window and watches the snow fall. "A little tired, maybe. You can smell fever?"

"A sweet, high note, like the sap of some tropical flower," Hannibal surfaces from their embrace and cups her face in one hand. "Perhaps a nap would do you well. There is some time before dinner and nowhere for either of us to go."

"Mm, a nap does sound good," Will agrees. Even as she says the words, her eyelids grow heavy and languid. "You know, in New Orleans, in the summer, the air would grow heavy with sex and death, like a fever of unknown origin. The heat waves were almost unbearable when they came in from the sea. I hated being on patrol back then, on those black streets, watching people die. To everyone around, it was just life, just death; a certain fatalism that embodied life in the South. Terrible things.
Bananas would rot and harbor tarantulas. Weather would come and it was always bad. Children born and killed as easy as breathing, in gunshots and knifings and drownings." Will puts her forehead against his collarbone and sighs. "Yeah, okay, I think I need a nap."

Hannibal chuckles, affectionate and gentle as he guides her up the stairs, into a dark room guarded at the door by a stern suit of Japanese armor. It is a testament to her lack of awareness that she simply steps out of her jeans without pause and slips between the covers. Hannibal sits at the edge of the bed and cards long fingers through her hair; she closes her eyes and they are the last thing she remembers.

When she wakes the first time, the stag is standing at the foot of the bed, hot breath misting in the frigid air. Did someone leave a window open? The house is deathly quiet. She slips out of bed and her feet freeze into twin rods of ice, fragile and unable to hold her weight. They crack and splinter into pieces. She falls. The floor lets her through so that she lands on the couch downstairs, the one she likes to sit on whenever she and Hannibal talk. Goosebumps crawl all over her naked skin. Above her, the ceiling warps into odd patterns and shapes, making her eyes tear up. Her tears, they also freeze, creating tight little icicles set against her skin like miniature diamonds. The chandelier sprouts antlers and drips blood, like a crown on a severed head.

Don't you see?

Oh, but she does. She sees everything.

When she wakes the second time, only the suit of armor stands there watching over her. The room is warm, pleasantly so, and when she stands, her feet don't freeze. Her dreams are getting quite inventive as of late. She notes that her bag is sitting atop an ottoman in a corner of the room. This is Hannibal's room. The large double doors must lead to the hallway, so she enters through the smaller door, which leads into a spacious en suite and a walk-in wardrobe where she shyly deposits her bag.

First, she bathes, which feels sinfully luxurious in his glass-walled shower. Then, careful not to drip all over his marble floors, she towels herself dry and lathers herself with lotion. (There is, on the countertop, a complete set of toiletries just for her, everything laced with jasmine and lavender. There is also a full set of burgundy towels and a matching robe.)

Her phone buzzes while she brushes her teeth, a message from Beverly asking how things are going, complete with an adorable picture of Cooper trussed up with a bow around his fuzzy little head. Will responds in vague words while trying to figure out which one between two different moisturizers goes on her face first. Beverly told her to buy this shit, but never did get a chance to walk her through it, and the stepwise Korean skincare regimen is too much for her to single-handedly make sense of.

In time, she steps into some underwear and digs out a shirt dress from her bag. She even takes the time to blow-dry her hair, a true attempt at arranging her wayward curls into some semblance of order.

There, she thinks, looking herself over once she's done. You look good, Will Graham.
And she does, doesn't she? Almost as if she might fit in here, within the confines of his meticulously curated world. Before her resolve fails, she steps out of the bathroom, following her nose downstairs to the kitchen. The hallway is awash with savory smells of roasting meat and herbs. Her stomach growls in anticipation.

"There you are," he smiles, looking up from where he is preparing plates in the kitchen. "I heard you stir, and just in time. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I did," Will says, and it's true. Her shoulders feel loose, free of the tension she carries each day. "Pork chops? A little simple for you, no?"

"Sometimes, simplicity is key," Hannibal responds. His sleeves are rolled up above the elbow, revealing corded muscle and tanned skin. "Pork chops are often thought of as bone-dry pale chunks of protein, but if done right, they can be as juicy and tender as the fattiest, freshest steaks. I prefer to brine them beforehand, which is a crucial step."

Will steps up beside him and peers over what he is ladling carefully over the meat. "And applesauce."

"Charred," Hannibal nods, "to partially eliminate the natural tartness of the fruit, making it just as delicious on top of our pork as it will be tomorrow alongside our duck breast. We may also mix it with fresh yoghurt for breakfast, if you feel inclined. The caramelized sugars give it a rich, complex taste. Add a little cider, a touch of cinnamon, et voilà."

Together, they take the plates to the dinner table, where there are lit candles and cutlery waiting for them. The chairs are set closer together than ever. Will leans in and can smell the hint of mint in the braised fennels, which look soft and sweet after generous time spent bathing one of Hannibal's warm ovens. The roasted potatoes, too, look finely done; Hannibal spares no effort in even the smallest of details.

"I shall gain so much weight from your rich food," Will quietly chuckles, tucking herself into a chair and allowing Hannibal to serve her. How can she not, when he looks so pleased and eager?

"The food is sourced from clean ingredients; if you maintain a regular exercise regimen, there should be no cause for concern," Hannibal counters.

"Not much time for that with my lifestyle."

"Then perhaps a change in lifestyle is in order."

"Says the doctor who works eighteen-hour shifts?"

"This doctor takes the time to run four times a week," he shrugs, seating himself close to her, as close as they can possibly sit. "It is something I have disciplined myself to do to help allay the inevitable deterioration the body undergoes under stress."

"Discipline is something I find it hard to imagine you without," Will smiles. She cuts into the first portion of the meat and finds it just as fresh as Hannibal had touted. Fat spreads over her tongue, coating her mouth in warmth and that satisfying umami that characterizes consumption of flesh.

"It is tantamount in my profession, otherwise one does not survive past the first years of medical school. I imagine the same can be said for you. Those first few years in the force must have drilled discipline into your bones."

"It drills into you habit," Will points out, "which differs from discipline in such that considerable
thought is required for the latter, whereas absentmindedness is acceptable in the former."

Hannibal softly smiles. "Touché, my dear. All the more impressive, then, your command over your life."

"I don't know," Will sighs, spearing a piece of potato and watching its insides slowly burst. "Sometimes it feels as though my life is tearing apart at the seams."

"Something outside forcing its way in, or something inside wanting to come out?" Hannibal asks.

"Either?" Will shrugs, "or perhaps both. I'm waiting to find out. Every day is a new day for discovery, as they say."

"Despite how art and literature often idealize it, discovery is neither peaceful nor pretty. One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time."

Will closes her eyes and sees the floating solace of her house, glowing in the darkness, beckoning her to come home. If she looks a little longer, there he is, Hannibal, waiting by the door, hand raised in an unconditional welcome.

"What would you say," Will asks him, in a strange fit of bravery (or carelessness), "if I were to tell you that I fear I'm going insane?"

"I would ask you why you think so," Hannibal tells her, "and insist that you seek active treatment. It could be a number of different conditions. One must assume all possibilities until proven otherwise."

"Differential diagnosis."

"Our very own form of detective-work," Hannibal nods.

It gives her warmth and comfort, Hannibal's calm belief. If anything, his belief in her seems strong enough to be able to carry them through when she can no longer believe in herself. What she dreads is whether or not Hannibal will still want her if and when it is proven that there is something very wrong with her head.

They conclude dinner in a companionable, thoughtful silence. The portions are just right to fill her up without being too much. She is instructed to retire to the sitting room, where the fire is roaring in the hearth. Will goes to the large windows. Snow is falling heavily outside, dampening sound and light until the whole world descends into silence. All of a sudden, she feels cocooned within these dark walls, held tight and secure in this place where Hannibal controls all things. Surely here nothing can touch her. Surely here, they are safe.

Hannibal returns with a generous plate of her apple pie and two snifters of bourbon. "That's a lot of pie," she chuckles, watching him set it down and take a sip of his drink.

He hands her the other one as he approaches to enfold her in another one of his covetous embraces. "Enough for both of us. Unless you should want more. The rest is in the oven, keeping warm."

Whiskey crawls down her throat with searing, familiar heat. She closes her eyes and can almost pretend that she is a normal woman enjoying a normal romance—except when Hannibal hums right next to her ear, she is distinctly reminded of how exceptional this man is for even consenting to stay beside her despite all the trouble she puts him through. No such romance is normal. No such connection is ordinary.

"It gives me great joy," Hannibal murmurs, "to see you within these walls. Spaces I occupy everyday
are brightened with your presence."

Will laughs. "That's probably the first time I've brightened anywhere with my presence. It's usually the opposite."

"Fool for them." He draws back a tad and takes another swig of his drink, which Will matches with one of her own. "Have you any wishes for the coming year?"

She has a few, but none of them as desperate and true as this one. "More time with you," she smiles. "I want to make you happy, because you make me happy."

Will wonders if that's too simplistic, too naive, too much of a presumption—but Hannibal exhales and plants a soft kiss on her lips, murmuring something quiet in another language before whispering against her cheeks, "You already make me happy, mylimasis. Never doubt that."

"I'm troublesome," Will denies.

"You're worth the trouble," Hannibal insists, "and if you were easy, I would never have fallen for you at all. As it stands, you are able to understand me like no one else has, and you don't seem to even try."

Will blinks up at him, counting again the faint freckles on the bridge of his nose, memorizing the slant of his eyelashes under firelight. "Stole the words right out of my mouth. It's like you have what I have, this capacity to see... sometimes you scare me with how well you understand me."

"Understanding is its own kind of discovery," he says. "True understanding is an unmatched kind of ecstasy."

It strikes Will then that this is what she wants. She wants to see Hannibal. She wants to know him and be known in return. She wants to know him so well that she can tell when he first rounds the corner, sense his scent when he comes into a room. Know the lift of his heels, the glide of his feet, the touch of his hands. Become familiar with the way he smiles enough that she can call it to her imagination at any given time. This is what she wants. *He* is what she wants.

Somehow, in a mutual tilt of motion, their lips come together in a warm seal, the world around them constricting to high points of heat and sensation. His hands on her back, her fingertips on the nape of his neck, the proprietary sweep of tongue, the breath of air fanning over warm skin—each one an old revelation to the other, both bright as binary stars finally colliding into one. Perhaps it's the bourbon, perhaps the low boil of the fever underneath her skin—Will feels no inhibition when she dips her own tongue into his mouth, when she lifts her thigh to rub up against his hip. She has dreamt about his taste for days now, imagined many times the weight and girth of him inside her, something she has never done with anyone else before. She has never been this obsessed with anyone else before. There is no before.

Because before, she's had sex, but that was all physical intimacy. Try as they might, her previous relationships were never capable of broaching the high walls she has built around herself. But Hannibal—with Hannibal, everything is more. Words are more. Touch is more. The future is more.

In her mind, a decision solidifies. Will pulls away from the kiss to lift the hem of her dress over her head, throwing the garment aside and then beginning to tug at Hannibal's shirt buttons. His eyes, they grow darker and more intent, so intent that she can feel them trace the outlines of her skin. Their hands seek each other, his hands following the trajectory of his covetous eyes, caressing and familiarizing once more, mapping out old haunts and seeking out new territory. She undoes the
buttons, discarding the offending shirt in favour of him.

Hannibal radiates heat, inundating and intoxicating heat, more so when they come together skin to
skin. They pull into each other, mouths seeking new purchase. Will drags her palm over the shifting
muscles of his back; Hannibal twines fingers deep into her hair and pulls. The resulting tilt of her
head allows him more control: such control, Will can feel it, thrumming right underneath his surface,
holding back desire so overwhelming it threatens to drown them both. The hair on his chest rubs
against the sensitive skin of her belly when he picks her up to lay her down by the fire.

"You will be the ruin of me," he breathes, mouth dragging over her jaw, across her neck, along her
collarbones, onto her chest. He unsnaps her bra with ease and discards them, but favours her
abdomen with his mouth, leaving her breasts untouched and exposed to air, peaking and sensitive.

She sighs, hips lifting when he reaches for her underwear. At the first hot touch of his tongue against
her clit, Will jackknifes from the floor, twisting in surprise and pleasure, back arching and hands
scrabbling at the rug underneath her. He hums and feasts with obvious delight, partaking and
fulfilling a hunger long repressed. Once in a while, he sucks marks into the skin of her thigh,
breaking in between to allow her to come down from her gasping highs.

Liquid warmth is beginning to pool in her groin—she can feel it: that cramping, trembling feeling
deep within her core. She tries to warn him but words aren't coming, they aren't forming in her
mouth. All she can do is gasp and hold on, fingertips raking marks into his bare shoulders.

"How beautiful you are like this," he croons, meeting her gaze, mouth red and shining wet with her
slick. "Perhaps one day I shall draw you in this form, your pleasure under firelight." He slips a
couple of fingers into her and crooks them just so; Will's hand darts out to grab at his forearm.
"Hush, darling. I have you."

Will's eyelids flutter.

I have you.

Hannibal favours more kisses on her belly and thighs, puts that wicked tongue of his back to work to
make Will keen. Goosebumps crawl all over her body each time he slips his fingers into her. And
then he sucks, grazes teeth against her clit—the pleasure becomes so intense she feels she might split
apart. Will arches off the floor, whole body convulsing with pleasure, perception shattered into a
million brilliant shards of light and pure sensation—she gasps, and gasps, lungs heaving breath after
breath of precious oxygen. In that moment, with one smooth motion, Hannibal shucks off his pants
and slides forward to penetrate her, hands spanning her hips to hold her in place.

She doesn't even feel the pain. She doesn't hear their ragged breathing. All she hears is a quiet little
click, two puzzle pieces finding their lost edges, that blissful release of a connection becoming true.
Their bodies begin to undulate together in an age-old rhythm, requiring no words, no cues, no signals
but those which their touches communicate to each other.

Will arches, reaches, loops her legs around his naked hips, seeking more heat, more contact, and he
obliges, sliding hands underneath the middle of her back, pulling her closer, pushing in deeper. He
latches seeking lips to her nipple without breaking rhythm. She plants one foot square on the floor to
gain more leverage. Without warning, he lifts her clean off the floor, shifting them such that she
straddles his thighs, both of them sitting upright. It pulls a groan from deep within Will's throat, her
eyes clamping shut; she feels so full, so full, her belly aches with the pleasure of it.

It doesn't take them long after that. She drives their rhythm now and it suits her, shifting up and down
on top of Hannibal even as she cradles his face in between her hands. His eyes glimmer up at her,
dark and terrible pools of consuming desire. She runs her thumbs underneath them, over those devastating cheekbones, around and over his temples, just gently so. When they peak, they peak together, her pleasure pulling at his, her whole body contracting and convulsing around him to milk every last drop. He spills inside her, a hot sensation unfamiliar after so many years, but welcome, always welcome, because Will wants to keep a part of him just for herself. Her selfishness is only as acute as her obsession.

He lays them both down on the rug to rest. The fire is warm enough that they are content to lay equally naked with their tangled limbs askew. Hannibal gradually softens and slips out from inside her, making her squirm. In turn, she seeks his mouth to kiss and tastes herself on his tongue. That does give her a little thrill. Perhaps even now he is developing a palate with which to taste her, just her, unique to these moments shared between the two of them. It is intoxicating, she realizes anew, to be the focus of such wholly reciprocated attention.

Will lays her head on his arm and looks into his eyes, seeing at once the distant stars and constellations of his childhood, and the beautiful cobblestoned streets of the old world where he became a man, and the myriad foreign shores he has travelled through the years. The dogged perseverance and iron discipline to train himself, to achieve the pinnacle of his ideals. The fierce delight in all things beautiful, the joy in all discoveries, the exhilaration of each successful piece of work. And, through it all, the longing for a companion, at first a raging roar of desperation but over time dulled into a bone-deep, nostalgic ache.

Will looks into his eyes and sees herself, a complementary reflection, the matching puzzle piece, the one.

"What do you see?" Hannibal asks, voice barely above a whisper.

Will smiles. "You."

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I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.
I love you as the plant that never blooms
but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers;
thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance,
risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body.
I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.
I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;
so I love you because I know no other way
than this: where 'T does not exist, nor 'you',
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.

- Pablo Neruda

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She might not have felt the pain at the time, but she feels it now, shifting gingerly in Hannibal's hold as they lay halfway covered in furs by the fire. Hannibal has acquired some pillows from the couches and they have made themselves comfortable, entirely unwilling to move more than a meter to more appropriate locations. He runs a hand up and down the exposed length of her back and thigh; she traces the lines of his musculature with her palms. Chest and arms and abdomen, he is fit and powerfully built, obviously a body trained over years with hard work and knowledgeable attention. Will has nothing like Beverly's capacity for discernment, but even she can tell that Hannibal is beyond handsome in form.

Will tilts her head up, nuzzling against Hannibal's jaw. "The pie is getting cold."

"It will keep," Hannibal murmurs back, mouth now occupied with the skin of her shoulder, the curve of her neck. "I only have you for the few days the snow traps us indoors, and I intend to savour you to every last fingertip."

Will accepts a kiss before reaching up and smoothing hair away from Hannibal's warm brown eyes. "You do know I will come back to you."

"I hope so," Hannibal sighs, "and one day, soon, I will convince you to stay for good."

She doesn't say anything in response to that, because if she opens her mouth, she may inadvertently confess that she is embarrassingly close to being convinced. They have known each other for such a short period of time. Even by the most forgiving standards, marrying this man is hasty.

And yet is it?

Time dilates when they are together, such that one day feels like an eternity. Will, who has an overactive imagination and is a closet romantic besides, can scarcely imagine what it would be like to be a part of Hannibal's world, submerged in his presence, themselves a fixture in each other's day to day lives. Would they live here? Would Will abandon her house, her hard-earned independence? Would she be content like so? Would they have children?

Children. Hannibal probably wants children. She could be pregnant. She isn't on the pill. (She will have to be.) But what if she is pregnant? Does she want children?

"You've gone somewhere else," Hannibal smiles down at her. "What is it that has stolen your attention away from me?"

"Boy, you're a greedy, selfish thing, aren't you?" Will laughs, startled. At first sight, he isn't the type of person to be jealous, but when Will reconsiders, it makes sense. Hannibal covets all things that are his, and it shows. "Just thinking too much, getting ahead of myself. The usual. Terrible habit of mine. Haven't found a way to break it."

"With an imagination like yours, I imagine it can be quite terrible indeed." His thumb smooths gently over her cheekbone, coming to rest against her temple as he cradles the weight of her head in his palm. "Would it be of any comfort if I told you that whatever it is that has you worried, I shall take care of? I would like to take care of you, in all and any capacity you will allow me to."

"I know," Will sighs. "I'm trying to let you. But it's not easy. I've always taken care of myself. Trust like that doesn't come easy."

"I know," Hannibal echoes, and somehow, Will believes him. She eases back on the furs behind her and takes him along so that his body drapes over her own.
"How long have you been alone?" she asks.

It takes a while, but Hannibal does answer. "All my life, I should like to say, although it isn’t quite true. I lived with my family in our ancestral home until they died. Lithuania under Soviet occupation was not a friendly place."

"No," Will murmurs, "I don't imagine so."

"And then the orphanage. Nothing else quite emphasizes a child's loneliness more than isolation in the midst of a crowd. Though by the last years of my tenure there, I had become so adept at loneliness that I wore it like a mantle. Being lonely was better than being one of them, I convinced myself."

"And it never quite fell off," Will says, reading between the lines, seeing behind the shadows of his words. "That loneliness you wore as a mantle, you still carry it with you. And you still believe that being lonely is better than being one of them. One of the many, trite and blind, whiling away their lives in tasteless, unworthy pursuits. Wasting potential and opportunity. Living but never quite alive."

Hannibal stops breathing for a moment. Will feels it, what with her arms around his torso, her palms flat underneath his shoulder blades. Then, with exquisite gentleness and an overwhelming sense of adoration, Hannibal tilts her head to take her mouth into a deep kiss.

"How clearly you can see me. You are astonishing. How fortunate I am to have found you."

His words are like morphine to her veins, reducing her to the warmest, most intimate sort of lethargy. In his arms, Will is content.

Hannibal smiles down at her. "I am no longer lonely, mylimasis. You are here with me. I only hope that you feel the same." He pauses for a while, setting his cheek against her forehead, taking her hand and twining their fingers. "After the orphanage, where my uncle finally found me after years of searching, I lived with him and his wife in Paris. There I studied and became enlightened to the beauty of the world. It is a beautiful place, the old world. One day, perhaps you will allow me to show you."

"Would be nice," Will sighs, closing her eyes. She doesn’t even have to try very hard to imagine it. A boat on the Mediterranean, skimming the azure waves under a bright sun. Ancient stars at night, watching over them as they leisurely sail the coast. Ports where cultures blend, people speaking something somewhat French and Spanish at the same time. Will finding herself lost in translation, but happily trusting Hannibal to lead the way.

She falls asleep like that, lulled by his warmth and caress, down and down into the darkness until it no longer matters where the lines end between them, only that they are one.

Will wakes with a moan, insides tight with pleasure, awareness scrambled and confused. It takes her a whole minute to shake the sleep from her skin, and yet another to make sense of the situation she finds herself in. Her arms have wrapped themselves around a warm body, Hannibal, around Hannibal, and they are no longer by the hearth downstairs. Another coil of white-hot pleasure in her core; her fingers dig deep into Hannibal's shoulder, gouging marks deep enough that he should
bleed. She gasps, writhing against him, against his open mouth on her breast. The pillow behind her head strains her neck at a strange angle but she doesn't care. They are upstairs now, in his bed, in his room, but she doesn't care.

"Ha-Hann-please," she groans as his fingers spread her and stroke her just right, sending her nerves so easily on fire. "Please," she begs, "please, please," trusting that Hannibal knows what she's asking for.

In one swift motion, Hannibal slips his fingers out from within her and flips her over. Will clutches a pillow, puts her forehead against it, panting and parting her legs with nary a single thought to how she must look, just pure hunger, just building heat. He lifts her hips a little higher and slides in without warning, knocking air out of her lungs as he immediately sets a hard pace.

Will's consciousness contracts down to sensation and sound. She closes her eyes and lets inhibitions go, trusting that she is safe here. And then there is only the sound of their breaths rushing in and out past moist lips. The hot span of Hannibal's hand low on her belly. The press and rub of Hannibal's chest against the length of her back. The lips on her shoulder, the other hand holding her hip, the teeth raking down her spine, vertebra after vertebra. A dry palm passing over her heavy breast. Skin to skin, the most brutal kind of gentleness communicated from his body to hers.

Hannibal fucks her through the first orgasm, reducing her to sobs and gasps without faltering in his pace. She will be more than sore after this. She will be raw and inflamed, a physical reflection of the force of his desire for her. A groan falls from her throat when he reaches around her and drags a palm up her chest, fingers finally spanning to wrap snug around her neck. It is a gentle grip, mere support, but the ownership, the possessive control in it, sparks a raging fire in her. Will reaches back to grab his arm, lifting her torso higher for leverage, and shoves back against him, learning the rhythm, matching his pace. It makes him curse, harsh and bitten off in a language far removed from any she knows, and together they drive each other over the edge, orgasming with an almost animal intensity.

Will blacks out.

When she comes to, Hannibal has turned her over on her back again, his arms still curled around her torso. She shifts and stretches sleepily, fingertips reaching for the head of the bed and toes reaching for the foot. It takes her a few moments to produce coherent speech.

"Well, damn," she smiles, easy as you please, her relaxed, disinhibited state slurring the edges of her words. "Color me very impressed, doctor."

Hannibal hums, nose nudging against her jaw. "I aim only to please you, mylimasis."

"What's that mean, mylimasis?" Will asks, curious as a cat. Her eyes droop, though, as she speaks, and a yawn threatens at the back of her throat.

He pulls the sheets over them and curls close to settle in more comfortable repose. "It means what you are to me. Cherished, treasured, and beloved."

Again, Will finds herself with no words to offer in return. So instead she curls an arm around his head and allows him to settle on her chest.

They sleep holding each other, wake holding each other, and he fucks her again in the dim morning light, this time slow and almost ponderous, an exploration, a quiet revelation. Eventually, they do rise from the bed to shower, a new and luxurious experience for Will because they do it together. They wash each other with fond attention, towel dry, and debate about how much they should even bother
to get dressed. Will is quite sure the clothes will come off anyway, maybe during breakfast, maybe after. Ultimately, in the interest of safety, Hannibal puts on pajama pants and Will borrows one of his large shirts. That she is likely to be pregnant only strikes her once more, and without the gravity such a thought would have normally commanded. Somehow it doesn't seem like such a huge concern right this moment, when she is too busy delighting at the sight of a shirtless Hannibal flipping pancakes for her, when the piled-up snow outside makes it cold enough that she has an excuse to wrap her arms around him and press close.

Hannibal curls one arm around her shoulders and resumes his task, single-handedly managing the pancakes with very little effort.

"Has it ever occurred to you that you may have entered the wrong profession?" Will asks, "Because I've never had food as good as anything you've made me."

He chuckles, plating the cooked pancake. She hands him more batter. "I don't think I would enjoy cooking as much as I do if I did it for a profession."

"Ah, it's one of those things."

"It's one of those things," Hannibal smiles. "Would you prefer blueberries or strawberries?"

"Can I have both?"

"My dear," he sighs, pulling her impossibly closer, "you can have whatever you want."

"Then both," Will hums contentedly, though she doesn't say half the things that spill forth on her tongue. I want a place here in your home. I want you all to myself. I want everything you can give. I want, I want, I want.

Greed isn't always ugly, Will learns. Sometimes, greed is a byproduct of something beautiful.

Snowfall is steady for four days. They pass the last night of the year in the study, sipping fine wine and glutted on rich food. Kept safe here within his dark walls, Will is braver than she has ever been before, pushing her own limits and revelling at the amount of power she holds over this magnificent man. Neither of them notice the passing of the year; she is too preoccupied with his taste and musk, the weight of his cock on her tongue, the veins and ridges she accommodates with her lips. She only notes that it is past midnight when she happens to look up at the clock while riding him, her hips undulating in that age-old rhythm built into the very fibers of the human body.

After they are done, they recline on the divan twined together like vines. Hannibal recites poems for her, some solemn and melancholy, others playful and teasing like these.

"Et son bras et sa jambe, et sa cuisse et ses reins,
Polis comme de l'huile, onduleux comme un cygne,
Passaient devant mes yeux clairvoyants et sereins;
Et son ventre et ses seins, ces grappes de ma vigne,
S'avançaient, plus câlins que les Angels du mal,
Pour troubler le repos où mon âme était mise,
His fingers wander over her bare skin, making her squirm and laugh. "Is that Baudelaire? Sometimes, Hannibal, you are such a dandy."

"A knowledge of French poetry," Hannibal hums, pleased. "You are full of surprises, my dear."

"I know enough French to understand that that particular poem isn't precisely appropriate for polite company," Will snorts. "I did read French in college."

"Did you? Tell me what literature you found to your liking."

Time passes them by like so, gems of conversation and intellectual appreciation in between bouts of intense, passionate sex. Will could live like this. Will is getting addicted to this. A life where she can have his entire attention focused upon her, a life where she can leave behind all worries and simply be. What a dangerous gift he gives her, this unconditional acceptance. What a perilous thought to think that they will be more than good together.

The following day, the snowfall stops but the wind continues to chill the eastern seaboard, preventing any possibility of a melt. Beverly calls her to catch up, confessing with very little guilt that she has eaten through Will's supply of nachos and is now binging on back-to-back episodes of some new drama called *Stranger Things.*

"At first, it didn’t really matter, but now I realize it’s a terrible choice for me to watch when I’m trapped all the way out here in the middle of nowhere. I kept thinking last night, *what if the Demogorgon comes out of that moldy wall in the second bedroom?!*" Will laughs again, wondering if she should tell Beverly how many times she has dreamt of shadowy monsters walking the halls of her house with her. "And then I realized I had seven dogs and a shotgun. If all else fails, there’s the gasoline in the garage; I can always set the whole house on fire. But! Anyway! Nice try distracting me; it didn't work. Now, details! I want to hear all of it!"

She keeps Will on the phone for a good half hour, a conversation she is quite sure Hannibal is overhearing from where he is creating yet another masterpiece in the kitchen. After lunch, Hannibal does conduct one phone call to check on his intern, who is apparently handling the few days without him just fine.

Again, after that, more sex, which puts her right to a deep, contented sleep. She has grown so familiar with his home that she begins to dream of walking through the dim hallways and darkened rooms, the distinct decorations materializing before her in vivid detail. It's his study, of course, because that's where they spend the most time, sitting together on the divan or naked on the rug before the hearth. In her dream, she walks around the room with muffled footsteps, fingertips dragging over the surface of his desk, over the shelves, across the wall. The sketches on his walls look vaguely different, and if she had more command over her dreams, she would squint at that particular one that looks like a butchered man.

In the morning, she wakes to an insistent ringing.

"I believe that's yours, darling," Hannibal murmurs, pressed up against her back, his breath warm on the nape of her neck.

She swipes at the phone without looking. "Graham."

"Will," Jack barks from the other side, "we need you in asap."
"Someone's killing people in this weather? Really?" Behind her, Hannibal huffs a sleepy chuckle.

"It's a big one. I need your head on your shoulders sharp. I'm texting you the address. If you need escort—"

"M'fine," Will grunts, "just let me get some damn coffee."

"Well, make it fast."

Jack hangs up without further ado, and seconds later, a ping heralds the arrival of the address. Will squints at the bright screen, which reads Grafton, W. Virginia.

"That's three and a half hours away. Ugh."

"Must you go so soon?" Hannibal sighs. "May I convince you to stay a while longer?"

Will turns in his arms and presses soft kisses against his mouth, apologetic. "Duty calls. I'm sorry, love."

Hannibal sighs again, disappointed but acquiescing to the situation. If their positions were reversed, Will would have to let him go too.

Nevertheless, he rises with her and goes downstairs to prepare food and coffee for her to take on the way. While getting ready, she exchanges several texts with Beverly, who is also being called in. It takes her but twenty minutes to shower and dress. With a moment's deliberation, she intentionally leaves some of her belongings in Hannibal's en suite, a sign he will surely interpret the way Will intended. She is making a space for herself here in his home; she is here to stay.

Hannibal has for her an egg sandwich and coffee in a carafe. He has also warmed up her engine and prepared her coat. He holds her in a tight hug at the doors, clearly unwilling to let her go. With kiss after kiss, she conveys her apologies, and eventually they do part, though it isn't by any means an easy parting.

Overnight, the snow hasn't even melted enough to make the roads appear more manageable. The winter sun is far too bright and unforgiving. The cold makes her whole body tremble with shivers so intense it almost makes her nauseous. If this is how it feels like to bid each other a temporary goodbye, heavens forbid they ever separate. Will's throat feels tight as she straps herself into her car. It's all she can do not to turn right around and go back inside to the dark warmth of his home.

Before her own desires can better her judgement, Will eases the car out onto the roads. Hannibal is still standing by his door, watching her go; she refuses to look back at the rearview mirror until she is pulling into the highway. With any luck, this case will be quick, so that she can be back at his side before long.

But if Will, of all people, is being called out... what are the chances?

Three hours of arduous driving through the snow. Jack greets her on the sandy shores of a frozen beach in West Virginia, though her eyes have already gone past Jack from the moment she stepped out of her car. Forebodingly, she feels the first throbs of an oncoming migraine; an aspirin or two
wouldn't hurt. She pops a couple as she steps past Jack.

Wordlessly, they approach the towering pole. That's what it clearly is: a totem pole made of dismembered, assembled human body parts. CSI is already having a field day over it, their cameras flashing, their gadgets whirring. Will tucks her chin below her scarf and trudges forward, nodding at Beverly who somehow got here faster than she did.

"Hey, girl," Beverly greets her, grinning from behind her camera. "What a way to welcome the year, eh?"

"It's a celebration," Will sighs in agreement, walking around the yellow markers in the sand. Behind her, Jack is a wordless but insistent presence, all ears to whatever she has to say. Perhaps she has proven herself with the last case enough for Jack to be able to trust her word a little more now, who knows.

"More like a jigsaw puzzle," Zeller remarks, lowering his camera to squint up at the pole.

"Yeah, but where are the corners?" Price wonders. They all stop and look at him. "My mom always said to start a jigsaw with the corners."

"Er," Zeller intelligently responds, "the heads are the corners, I guess?"

"Well, we've got too many corners," Beverly remarks, much to Will's amusement. No wonder at all that Will likes her. "Seven graves, but way too many heads."

Will notes that there are indeed seven graves dug up and laying open around where the pole stands. She slowly walks around it, observing the thick ropes, the knotwork, the differing decompositional stages, the sizes of the bones.

Jack follows behind her. "The headpiece appears to be the only recent victim. The others are years, even decades, old. And we know seven of the bodies were buried out here."

Will looks up, up at the top, where the body of a young man sits folded in an unnatural half, head in between shod feet, the crowning glory sat elevated on a nest of upturned arms.

"Whoever dug them up knew exactly where they were buried," she remarks.

"Guess it wasn't enough for him to kill them once; he had to come back and defile his victims," Jack huffs, hands visibly clenching as if he wished there was someone to catch, something to do.

Will sharply looks at him. "These graves weren't desecrated, Jack, they were exposed." She looks up again, more to avoid Jack's look than anything, though the totem pole certainly deserves her attention. Abruptly, it reminds her of a line she had heard some time ago, Robert Oppenheimer on an interview or another. *Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multi-armed form and says, 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.'*

So many worlds this killer has destroyed. But for what?

"Okay, everybody, let's go, let's clear the scene!" Jack calls out, clapping his hands twice to effectively disperse the team. They all scatter, heading back towards the distant entourage of cars and vans parked on the bay drive. Will walks back with them for some distance, before stopping and turning back to face the pole.

It draws the eye, certainly. Here, where there is but the steel ocean and the grey skies, the pole is a
blotch on the horizon, an ugly smear, a testament to the brutal cruelty of humankind. She wonders what Hannibal would think of this. Oh, certainly, he'd be intrigued. Will is, too, despite herself. But, she thinks, Hannibal would above all be disappointed. Because this isn't beauty. This is just ego.

She takes off her glasses and closes her eyes. The pendulum swings.

When she opens her eyes once more, the wind she inhales is much colder, the snow falling where it hadn't been before. She has planned this moment, this monument. She's collected all her raw materials in advance. She walks forward and wanders among the items laying there on the beach. She begins to work.

It is hard, arduous work. The cold is tough on the body. But she perseveres nonetheless, despite the frost making the pieces of her puzzle stiff and difficult to manipulate. She positions the bodies carefully, according each their rightful place. Piece by exacting piece, the puzzle comes together.

The latest victim, she saves for last. She wants him to watch her work. She wants him to know her design. It takes a while, and perhaps he hopes he can escape in the meantime, but when she is finally ready for him, he begins to truly struggle—in vain, of course, because she knows to tie strong knots. This isn't the first time. But this will be the last.

The blade slides in easily between his ribs. In through the skin, past the lungs, across the heart. It takes only a moment more before he stops struggling, and another moment for the light to dim in his eyes. Blood pools on the sand beneath them, and when Will rises, she is careful not to let it touch her shoes. Mustn't make it too easy.

When she finishes, her body aches with exertion, but her design is complete. This is her resume. This is her body of work. This is her legacy. And she wants the world to see it.

Accomplished, Will walks up to the pole and stands underneath one of its wings, closing her eyes and turning her face up to the bleak winter sun. Cold blood drips on her cheek, smearing downwards like a sluggish tear.

When she opens her eyes, she is standing in her kitchen in Wolf Trap, Virginia.

____________________________________________________________

REFERENCES

(1) This is an excerpt from a poem in Charles Baudelaire’s Fleurs du Mal (Flowers of Evil) called “Les Bijoux” (“The Jewels”). DON’T JUDGE, OKAY, I NEEDED TO READ SOMETHING APPROPRIATE FOR INSPIRATION, AND HANNIBAL IS A DANDY. Here’s a translation of that particular section:

_Her long legs, her hips, shining smooth as oil,
Her arms and her thighs, undulant as a swan;
Lured my serene, clairvoyant gaze to travel
To her belly and breasts, the grapes of my vine.
With a charm as powerful as an evil angel
To trouble the calm where my soul had retreated,
They advanced slowly to dislodge it from its crystal_
Rock, where its loneliness meditated.

(2) Songs for this chapter: Nocturne No. 19 Op. 72 No. 1 in E Minor by Frederic Chopin; and of course the sex song, Eros by Ludovico Einaudi.

Chapter End Notes

ENCEPHALITISSSSSSSSSSSSSS

Also, FUCK ME but porn is hard to write! See, it took me three fucking months to do it! Jesus! It shouldn't be this hard, but because Hannibal is a fucking contrary romantic, I have to make it sweet and rough and romantic and soul-deep and raw and -- augh!
*tears hair out*
Chapter Summary

There is a promotion, a dress, and an opera.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Description of a panic attack.

The door is open behind her. The dogs are at her feet. The snow drifts in from outside, finely dusted over the steps of her balcony, where frost has taken over with sharply tipped spears and hard crusts. How did she get here? When did she come home?

It is cold enough that her breath rattles its way out of her throat. She finds the Volvo parked in her driveway, misaligned, the driverside door thrown open, the engine still running. The house key is in her hand. She doesn't remember opening the door with the house key in her hand.

Fingers shaking, Will closes the door and goes to turn off the car. The bag she took to Hannibal's house is where she left it on the passenger seat. She takes that and runs back inside, dogs at her heels, her knees knocking together in fear. The front door shuts behind her, blocking out the cold. She stumbles into the living room, where the heater has left a warm pocket of space, and collapses on the floor.

She can't breathe.

It hasn't been this bad in years. It has been many, many years. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, she gasps, gasps, coughs, cries, clutches her chest, forehead on the floor. The only thing she can hear is static. The world contracts down to white molting pinpricks against black; her whole body shakes. She groans, sobbing against the floor, eyes screwed shut.

She's going insane. She must be going insane.

Slowly, she recovers. Somehow she always does. She crawls up towards the light and the first thing she registers is Winston's whining, his wet nose huffing against her ear. Then Buster, who is quivering against her other side. Georgie is growling, pacing, nosing at her leg. The dogs are alarmed.

Well, they can't be more alarmed than me, Will thinks, breathing heavily against the carpet with the way her forehead is still resting on the floor. She has contorted herself into this position with such
panicked strength that her joints are aching from the effort; she can feel the headache building from the tension in her neck.

With much care, she turns to her side, and then onto her back. The dogs pile on her. For a while she just lays there, winded, blinking up at the ceiling where squares of sunlight make crenellated patterns as it slips past her blinds.

How much time did she lose? She digs into her pocket for her phone; it says 4:45pm. Almost sunset. But the last she can remember is arriving at Grafton, West Virginia this morning at a quarter before nine. A whole day, lost. Where did it go?

Her phone pings with a new text. It's Beverly.

*Hey girl, you there yet? Think I left my pizza pajamas somewhere in your house. Deliver to me when you find it?*

Will stares at her phone for a moment. Did Beverly not notice anything strange about Will's behaviour?

*Sure*, Will replies with leaden fingers. *Just got here.*

Beverly responds almost immediately. *Yeah, me too. Wreck coming into DC. Some idiot tried to go up the bridge ramps and slid right back down into the guy behind him. Dude was obviously absent when God was handing out functional brain cells.*

Will doesn't know how to respond. The humor fails to reach her. Her brain is still muddling around the idea of having apparently functioned well enough on auto-pilot to dodge Beverly's suspicion and make a four-hour drive home.

*I'm sleepwalking, Will thinks, hallucinating, hearing noises, having vivid dreams. Now I'm losing time.*

She doesn't want to think it. She won't think it. No.

Her phone suddenly starts ringing in her hand, the noise startling her as it shatters the house's silence. With fumbling fingers, she answers the call.

"H-Hannibal," she stutters, eyes squeezing shut as she bites her lip. Oh, how badly she wants to see him, to curl up in the safe warmth of his arms.

"Darling," Hannibal greets her, voice full of affection and longing. "I hope you've made it safely home."

"Yes," Will rasps, "I did."

"Very good. Have you eaten yet? A bath and a good meal should drive the cold away from your bones," he suggests, as always wanting only the best for her in every situation. "Were I there, I would make you something warm and comforting for dinner. Perhaps a stew. Mrs. Bradley may be able to offer you some wisdom."

Will chuckles hoarsely. "Mrs. Bradley always has wisdom to offer." And then, because her throat is too tight with all the things she needs to convey, she says, "I miss you already. I wish I went home to you."

Hannibal makes a soft sound on the other side, as if Will had said something that profoundly affected
him. "My dear, you know I wish for nothing but the same."

Winston sets his head on her chest, panting softly while Hannibal proceeds to talk to her about something or another. If she lays here and closes her eyes, she can easily pretend that she is in the safety of his house again, where the world’s worries cannot reach her. If she lays here and closes her eyes, she can pretend that they are once again together.

The truth is far too terrifying to fathom; at this point, Will thinks it's better to just pretend.

The following day, Will knocks on the door of Jack's office and sticks her head past the door. "Hey, Jack. Sorry about yesterday," she mumbles, eyes looking down at the carpeted floor.

"Sorry about what?"

Startled, Will looks up. Jack looks back at her, bemused. Swiftly, she averts her eyes and adjusts her glasses. "Er, I wasn't feeling like myself."

Jack snorts, returning to the folder he's perusing. "Well, not feeling like yourself is the nature of what you do."

"Suppose so," Will sighs, fidgeting by the doorway. After another moment of silence, Jack puts the folder down and looks back up.

"Something you want to tell me, Graham?" and somehow, his tone is both disappointed and cautious at the same time. He is expecting her to try quitting again, but is too conscious of permanently driving her away if he missteps around her delicate psyche.

Will clenches her jaw. "No."

"Then there seems to be something you don't want to tell me." Jack leans back in his chair, surveying her with flinty eyes.

"I guess I just got a little lost yesterday, is all." Will hates how defensive she suddenly sounds.

"And where are you now?"

*I know where I am today; the question is about yesterday.* "It got to me, Jack," Will says, soldiering through the words that need to be said. "All those bodies got to me. I just thought it was more obvious than it was."

This time, Jack leans forward, frowning. "If there's a problem, Will, you need to tell me. And let me help you. Is there a problem, Will?"

Will opens her mouth and almost confesses in a moment of weakness, but then her eyes flicker up and catch the annoyed impatience in the lines of Jack's face, the irritation in the cant of his shoulders. If there *is* a problem with Will, it's yet another setback. Jack isn't equipped to handle a Will Graham setback right now, especially without Alana's professional help. This killer needs to be caught. There are lives on the line.
"No, Jack, never mind," Will quietly shakes her head. "Everything's fine."

Closing the door softly behind her, Will retreats down the corridor towards the labs. When she gets there, she finds an organised chaos, lab techs carting body parts to and fro as corpses are reassembled together with their matching appendages. On bulletin boards are blown-up photos of the totem pole, spaces marked for each victim's ID, corresponding to colour-coded tags on the body parts. Beverly, Price, and Zeller all look like they're having fun playing with the human jigsaw puzzle.

"How many bodies?" Will asks, hands shoved into pockets to avoid touching anything sensitive.

"Seventeen in total," Zeller answers with relish.

"Joel Summers," Price presents to her a body with limbs still twisted on one of the tables, "is our freshest one. Forty years old, runs a cellphone store in Knoxville, Tennessee. Or did. Missing the last three days."

"Single stab wound to the heart," Ariadne follows, reading from a report while nursing her cuppa. "All the other injuries are post-mortem. Bones broken, hips and shoulders dislocated." She wasn't able to make it to Grafton in time, but according to Beverly, Ariadne was here to help coordinate with receiving and organising the bodies since last night. Apparently, Will's intern has an aptitude for lab work.

Will peers into Joel Summers' face and sees a plainly lived life. "He was special, somehow, to our killer. He held a place of honour."

Price continues, "Seven bodies from our unmarked graves around the totem pole, earth over all of the body parts matching the grave sites."

"Blunt force trauma, stabbings, strangulations," Zeller enumerates, "all of them are wrongful deaths."

Beverly follows without missing a beat. "There are at least eight other bodies that are recent grave robbings from all over West Virginia. No crimes attributed to any of them. Accidental deaths, actually."

Stepping back from the bulletin board, Will blinks and allows her perception to shift. "No," she shakes her head, integrating all the information they have given her. "No, Bev, they were all murders."


Will walks around her lectern, putting down her Powerpoint remote to speak as she paces. "Every death is different. Made to look like something else. No sadism, no torture... the method was less important to the killer than the simple fact that these people die."

She turns around to look up at a picture of Joel Summers' twisted body. "This one, Joel Summers... he was killed with a single stab to the heart. That's personal. Then he's presented with great
ostentation atop a display of all the previous victims. This killer's design was to never be discovered. A ghost. That is what excited him -- until now. After all these years... why is he coming into the light?"

"Will?"

Will turns and shades her eyes from the projector light. Alana is standing at the door, looking into her lecture room.

"Very moody and dark in here. I don't want to interrupt you if you're rehearsing..."

The lecture room is dark. Empty. The projector isn't on. There are no pictures displayed behind her. There are no students. Only her lectern sheds a small pool of light in the darkness.

Will looks again at Alana, who seems very real, and realizes that she has been hallucinating. Wide awake at Quantico and fucking hallucinating.

"Will? I'm sorry, I think I caught you at a bad time," Alana begins to excuse herself.

"Er," Will clears her throat, "no, no... it's okay." Alana smiles at her; she tries to smile wanly back. There is a certain tension between them, still palpable even after more than a week since their last disastrous appointment. "Come on in," Will invites. "I promise I won't try to argue too much."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," Alana laughs, stepping into the lecture hall while Will braces herself against her lectern. She feels somewhat faint but must hide it. Alana can't know. "I just wanted to follow up regarding your referral. I'm still trying to think of somebody suitable. Have you given it any thought?"

"Not really," Will admits. "I've been a little distracted."

"We've talked about setting limits and not working too hard," Alana chides playfully.

"Oh, no, not with work," Will clarifies. And then, moments after the words leave her lips, she realises what she has just admitted. Alana deduces as quickly as she does.

"Oh, I see."

"You still don't approve."

"I'm just being honest with you," Alana tells her, "because I don't want to lie to you and lose your trust."

"If you deny being jealous, why the disapproval?" Will asks. "Is it because you don't think I'm worthy to be with him?" Hot indignation curls in Will's gut at this thought, because Hannibal is hers now, Hannibal is hers.

"No," Alana firmly responds, "it's because I think you're too unstable right now to be in a relationship. And until that changes, I think you two should remain friends."

A deafening silence descends upon the lecture hall.

After a moment, Will huffs. "Well, thank you for not lying."

"Do you feel unstable, Will?"

Will looks at her, really looks at her, into her eyes, into the very motivations that drive her strong
opinions and determinations about the world.

"Does it matter?"

Because it truly doesn't, does it? Jack still wants her to be here to work. Will herself still wants to work. Alana, despite her misgivings, admires the work Will does. It doesn't matter how Will feels. All that matters is that she functions.

Will takes her bag from the lectern and turns off the light.

"I think I'll go get something for lunch outside. I'll see you later, Alana."

By the evening, they have a more comprehensive list of names for the victims that comprise the totem pole. Beverly is typing away at her laptop when Will walks back in. She quietly sets a cup of very sweet coffee at Beverly's elbow.

The display was built in Grafton for a reason. Totem poles, from what Will knows of them, are commemorations of special events. They tell the story of a life. If Joel Summers was the killer's finale, then it stands to reason that the lowest body on the pole was the beginning.

Will reaches over and taps the bottom-most name. "Fletcher Marshall. What do we know about him again?"

"Murdered in 1973, beaten to death in Grafton, his grave was robbed five days ago," Beverly says.

Will stands there and thinks.

"Anyone convicted of killing him?"

"Not yet," Price sing-songs from behind the microscope.

"Our killer, it's him. He got away with it forty years ago..." Will realizes, "...so he kept going. There's a connection here somewhere between Joel Summers and Fletcher Marshall. We just have to find it."

But they are all exhausted. The weather isn't making it easy. Even Beverly's preternatural cheer is dampened under the workload, with seventeen simultaneous bodies to be processed in their understaffed lab. Will heaves a large sigh and picks her coffee back up.

"I'm going for a quick walk to clear my head."

Outside, the wind is very brisk and still carries with it the scent of impending snow. Quantico is well-groomed despite the inclement weather, allowing her to wander the barren gardens where she would usually sit and meditate during better weather. Today, she can't sit on the benches, but she grits her teeth against the cold and walks around anyway.

She wonders what Hannibal is doing. She texted him sometime ago, during lunch, when her mind was still overwhelmed by that unfortunate conversation with Alana. Will knows she ought to be
more concerned about her hallucinations, but at that moment, all she could think about was securing Hannibal's attention for herself. Love has made her spoiled and greedy.

She checks her phone now and is delighted to see that Hannibal has finally replied. *Busy*, he says, *with people who don't have enough sense to stay indoors and instead end up breaking their bones by slipping on ice.*

Will smiles, cheeks hurting with the force of it. She can practically hear Hannibal's disdain echoing through his words.

*At least you didn't have the awkward conversation I just had with Alana Bloom,* she types. *She thinks we ought not to be in a relationship because right now I'm too unstable. She thinks my job makes me even more unstable. Basically, she wants me to quit both my job and you.*

Hannibal's response is near immediate. *You are forbidden from doing the latter.* And then, a few seconds later: *Whether you choose to do the former is your discretion.*

Will laughs to herself. *Don't lie; you would like for me to quit my job too.*

This time, it takes a moment for Hannibal to respond. *They only want you to function well, but I want you to feel well. You have an empathy disorder; what you feel everyday at work is overwhelming you, and yet you choose to ignore it. That is tantamount to abuse. I hope you do not begrudge me for saying so. I know you care about the lives you save, but the only life I care about in this scenario is yours. What about your life, Will? Who saves you?*

It could have been the cold that arrests her breath in her lungs, but she knows otherwise. Will screws her eyes shut and exhales, holding her phone to her lips and thanking her dumb luck for allowing her to find this man. She needed to hear those words, she did.

Though her fingers are stiff now from the cold, she quickly types: *You do. I hope you know that.*

"Will!"

She turns. Ariadne is standing by the double doors that lead back into the building. Will puts her phone away and comes as she's beckoned, shivering when the warm air blows into her face as she comes indoors. "What is it?"

"We have something," Ariadne tells her. "Jack wanted me to find you."

At the lab, Price, Zeller, and Beverly are all excitedly conferring with each other over a laptop. "Guess what, girl!" Beverly grins.

"What?"

"Joel Summers was adopted after his parents died. Guess who daddy is?"


"Yep!" Price confirms. "Mother, Eleanor Marshall, died in a car accident four years after Fletcher was murdered."

"A genuine accident?" Jack asks from where he is standing near the bulletin board.

"If she was murdered, she'd be on the totem pole," Will points out. "Unless..."
"Unless?" Jack prompts, growing more impatient.  
"Unless he loved her too much to disgrace her that way," Will murmurs, once again allowing her perception to shift. "Our killer was attempting to close a circle. Whatever wrong Fletcher Marshall committed, his boy was just as guilty." But something's missing, something vital and basic...  
"Sorry to rain on your parade," Zeller interrupts, "but I did a DNA comparison between Fletcher Marshall and Joel Summers."  
"What?" Beverly scowls. "Sometimes you are such an asshole!"  
"I'm a thorough asshole. No match between them."  
"What!" Beverly and Jack both exclaim. Will frowns. Price hums, rubbing his chin.  
"So you're saying Marshall's son wasn't his son?" Will clarifies.  
"Well, not biologically," Zeller shrugs. "But Marshall's name is on the birth certificate."  
Will leans over the laptop, clicking through the scanned paperwork. Behind her, Jack shifts impatiently. "Was anyone convicted for Fletcher Marshall's murder?"  
"Oh, yes," Ariadne pipes up, leafing through her notebook -- old-fashioned, this one -- and pointing out a detail in her meticulous-looking notes. "A man named Laurence Wells was questioned twice in 1973. He was never charged and still lives in Grafton."  
Will looks up from the laptop. "Is he colour-blind?"

Ariadne blinks at her. "Pardon?"

"Er..." Ariadne blinks again, looking down at her notes, "I didn't make a note of that."  
But Will's perception is already shifting everything into focus, pieces clicking into place as she straightens to regard them with a triumphant, grim smile.

The case is concluded twenty hours later with a successful arrest and yet another notch on Will's unflagging streak. It was a lengthy search for Laurence Wells, though the man hadn't been hiding from them. Everything had to be handled in West Virginia, of course, including the issuance of the warrants, the indictments, and the official interviews. If only she can be excused from the tedium that comes after the parts that require her.

Will drives home in the grey dark, slowly and with care. Snow has banked high enough on either side of the highway that the road is like a tunnel. She is thankful to soon be home. When she arrives, the dogs beg to be let out. Even though she's tired, even though her insides echo with their killer's angry dissatisfaction, Will indulges her canine companions, throwing the back door wide open and trudging through the snow with them as far as the edge of the wood.
She looks back at her house. Somehow, it looks a little duller than before, a little more desolate. Maybe because it's so dark out. She almost slips on a patch of ice and catches herself against a fallen log.

She herds the dogs back indoors with a single whistle. She locks all the windows and secures all the doors. The curtains are drawn shut. She stokes the fire and lets it build while she washes up. There is a nasty scrape on her arm from where she caught it against the log outside. The blood blisters beneath the skin in little maroon bubbles, vivid and grotesque.

_I'm tired_, Will thinks. _I need to sleep._

With her warmest pair of pajamas, she lays a cot out downstairs, in front of the fire where the dogs can all pile around her to keep her from hurting herself. If she can't trust herself anymore, she knows she can at least trust them.

"Fuck my life," Will cusses when she wakes to find her forearm inflamed and angry-red. Winston sniffs it but she catches his muzzle before he tries to lick.

She takes a picture and sends it to Hannibal. _Scraped it last night in the woods. Clean and cover?_

The hour is early but it takes Hannibal only a few minutes to respond, just enough time for Will to put on the coffee. _The raised blistering looks like contact dermatitis. Perhaps you touched something toxic to the skin, like poison ivy, or something else you are allergic to. Clean, disinfect with antibacterial ointment like Neosporin, and cover; if it worsens or spreads, get it seen to. A topical steroid may alleviate some of the redness and inflammation._

She does as she's told, dressing the wound with a bandage after rinsing it with soap and water. She'll have to buy some Neosporin in town. Afterwards, there are chores to be done and some work on her laptop in the afternoon. It's near the beginning of the new semester and she still hasn't planned out her classes; she has been very distracted as of late.

_You are a terrible influence_, she texts Hannibal, to which he replies, _Likewise, my dear. You will be the ruin of me._

Work occupies her. She types up her formal report, which is promptly emailed to Jack at the end of the day, and then begins planning out her semester by hand and on paper. She functions better this way. At the cusp of the evening, when the tired sun perfectly illuminates the edges of the skies with a burnt orange glow, Hannibal calls her as a reminder that she too needs sustenance and perhaps a reward for her stalwart efforts.

"Indulge in something you like," Hannibal urges, voice warm. "A triumph must be celebrated, not ignored."

"Oh, I don't know, these things hardly feel triumphant for me," she smiles, stirring her pot of soup, ground beef and vegetables and potatoes in a broth-and-tomato base. "Often it's just a sense of relief. One more done. Soon there'll be another, but for now I get to rest."

"Then indulge in that, and don't overdo the work. You must allow your mind time to breathe in
between."

"I try to sleep," Will says, "but it's not easy, especially after a case. Often, sleep requires some sort of sedation. It's terrible, I know. Sometimes it gets so bad that I wonder if it's some sort of physical illness preventing me from resting at all. It's not just plain insomnia—this nervous energy, it won't settle. I don't know how to describe it."

"Agrypnia excitata," Hannibal tells her, "is a real diagnosis. Rare and genetic, characterised by severe intractable insomnia, nervous energy, constant twitching, and dream enactments. A terrible condition if ever there was any."

Will snorts, covering the pot to let it simmer. Around her legs, the dogs nose around, enticed by the smell. "It is terrible to be constantly chasing sleep."

"There is plenty of emerging research in the subject," Hannibal continues, audibly pleased that she can keep up. His tone takes a more professorial note; she wonders if this is how he sounds like during a lecture. One of these days, she will repay him the favour and visit one of his speaking engagements. "It is very curious how REM sleep attempts but fails to stabilise in this condition, and instead stage 1 NREM sleep persists, keeping the brain in an excitatory state. The current consensus is that corticolimbic inhibitory control becomes disconnected from the hypothalamus and the brainstem reticular formation, though the exact mechanism appears to differ between the few permutations of the condition. Nevertheless, it results in extreme elevations of norepinephrine secretion throughout all hours of the day and night, whereas nocturnal melatonin production is severely lacking."

"Are you diagnosing me with this rare genetic disorder, doctor?" Will asks, amused.

"No, my dear," Hannibal assures her. "You may be an insomniac like myself, but we are both of the ordinary ilk. We are, after all, still capable of some sleep."

Will laughs. Hannibal, ordinary? She would never have thought. Hannibal seems to understand the humor in his statement, chuckling alongside her.

"I slept well with you. I've never slept so soundly in my life, I don't think."

Again, Hannibal is much pleased. Will can feel it through the phone, as silly as that sounds.

"And it gave me much pleasure, mylimasis, to have you in my arms every night. Would that I could persuade you to be mine, always."

Will closes her eyes, bites her lip, and imagines. It gets easier every time. Hannibal is without a doubt the most unusual and remarkable person she has ever known, and now she finds herself not just falling in love with him; it is something more, something she had never truly experienced before. Will adores him.

Will wakes to find that she has fallen asleep in the living room again. Somehow, her bedroom now seems uninviting, despite the more comfortable mattress and warmer bedding. Down here, at least, she has the dogs, who make for excellent companions and are cuddlers besides. It's less lonely with
them. Still lonely, but less.

Her forearm is redder and more blistered today. She is also running low on milk, eggs, and bread. Outside appears manageable enough for a quick trip into town, so she trudges through her morning routine, the highlight of which is a quick exchange with Hannibal, and bundles Winston up to accompany her for the ride.

The grocer is blissfully empty at this early hour, allowing her to take her time. She picks some produce to add to her pantry: Roma tomatoes and overpriced asparagus, a handful of basil, a head of cauliflower. Some mushrooms too and a small bag of lemons. This is all a change from her usual bland fare of rice, beans, baked fish, and bread, but Hannibal has spoiled her tongue for a more varied diet—what more is there to say? She buys some chicken thighs for the heck of it.

On her way home, she stops at the urgent care and hopes that they are open, hopes that there aren't many people inside. All she wants is a dose pack of steroids to get her on her way; the rash on her arm will only get worse otherwise.

"But you could buy some topical cream at the pharmacy," the nurse suggests, examining the nasty scrape.

"It's the blistering around it that concerns me," Will points out. "Topical may take too long."

"Too long?" the nurse asks with raised eyebrows. "Are we on a deadline?"

Will briefly glances up and considers her options. As much as she doesn't want to, playing to the nurse's sensibilities may hasten the process and get her what she needs. So she drops her gaze again and ducks behind her curls, rubbing the back of her neck for good measure. "...I have a wedding to attend," she lies. "I mean, I'm getting married. In two weeks."

Her words achieve the intended result. The nurse gasps, lips forming a perfect 'o' of delighted surprise. "Well! You should have said so from the beginning! Here, hold on, let me talk to the NP. She'll understand, believe me. We'll get you a dose pack, no problem." (2)

Will patiently sits through more small talk and smiles through a round of congratulations from the staff. Such happy people. They ask about her wedding dress and she tells them that she hasn't taken pictures for fear of her fiance finding them on her phone. They ask where and Will blurts out, "Italy. On the coast."

If Hannibal should ever find out about this, she will die of embarrassment. But what are the chances? Maybe one day, in the future, we'll sit together and I'll tell him a funny story of that time when I pretended I was going to marry him just to get myself some prescription drugs. Will smiles at the audacious thought.

Next door is a pharmacy, where she takes her prescription to get filled. She picks up some hydrogen peroxide, Neosporin ointment, and more bandages for good measure. On the way home, Winston noses at the bags with his usual quiet curiosity. Will is so distracted by her own fantastical thoughts that she almost misses the fresh tread on the snow on her driveway.

She has to keep herself from speeding up. There can only be one person who would have cause to drive out to her house in this snow. True enough, when she rounds the bend to approach her house, Hannibal's Bentley is idling in front of her porch, looking like it's been there a little while. He steps out as she parks and is there to open the door for her; Will disembarks straight into his arms.

"Hello, darling," he hums, clutching her close with both arms and a breathtaking amount of strength.
"How I have missed you."

She makes a noise of assent, mumbling, "Hannibal," into his neck. He smells of spices and musk, of warmth, of citrus and wine. He must have brought food for her. He must have been waiting for this.

Will turns her face up and is met with the kiss that she seeks. Their mouths share heat and breath, unwilling to part, though they must if they want to make it inside. Will asks, "How long are you here to stay with me?" half-dreading the answer.

"All weekend," Hannibal tells her with a smile. "I have negotiated around my schedule."

Will presses her nose into his jaw. "I should be sorry but I'm not. Not at all, if I get to keep you."

Hannibal only chuckles. "Come, darling, let's rest inside. We need to get you warm. You look overtired once again; my good work has been undone. I see that this will be my challenge henceforth."

Will laughs, reluctantly separating from him to let Winston out and gather her grocery bags. Likewise, Hannibal fetches a large duffel bag and a cooler from his own car. After fitting both of their cars in her covered garage, they retreat into the house, content to leave the world for a while.

Will doesn't fall in love at first sight, or even first kiss, but many months later, at this indelible moment when she wakes with him in bed before sunrise, his breath hot at her back, his arm draped across her ribs, the contours of his hips flowing into hers. They are two interlocking puzzle pieces, built specifically to fit together with each other and no one else. The room is soundless and still; Will is afraid to move because she doesn't want to disturb him. She stays there, unblinking, barely breathing, for nearly an hour, until finally he shifts and grazes her shoulder with his lips, a kiss, soft like the caress of a dream.

A languid Saturday morning, morning turning into afternoon, afternoon into evening, evening into the next morning, and again. They barely remove themselves from each other; separation is too painful.

"I only want to enjoy your nearness," Hannibal tells her, head resting on her chest as they later lay by the fire. He puts his ear on her sternum and listens for a whole minute. "Sixty-two," he declares afterwards, eyes closed and still listening. Will can't imagine anything more intimate.

They come together over and over, Will parting her thighs to make space for the girth of his hips. He labours above her and she loves him for it, her palms dragging up the muscled length of his back until her fingers twine behind his neck. Hannibal worships her body with lips and teeth and hands, with his eyes, with his words, with singular regard. He suckles on her breast, eyes closed in bliss, and the sight of his unadulterated pleasure pushes Will off the edge.

"I want to know everything possible about you," she tells him later, while the sweat dries on their skin. "I want to know even the parts of you that you feel compelled to hide from the world."

He dips his head at her words. She catches his face and thumbs at the single tear that escapes down his cheek. Pulling him close, closer, she opens herself to him, allowing him to rest where no one else
has, deep in her bones, as dark as it is, because the dark is where her heart hides.

Later, in the bathroom, she sits on the edge of the tub and lets Hannibal bandage her arm. Hannibal bids her to take the next dose of the steroid to allow the medicine to achieve the blood levels it needs to work. "The blisters should fade in time for the opera, if that is what worries you."

"Am I that transparent?" Will chuckles.

He kisses her fingertips and responds, "You wouldn't have gone through the trouble of acquiring the pills if you didn't feel like you needed them."

"I just don't want to ruin the night for you."

"That you will be by my side is more than enough. Don't you worry too much, darling. You will do just fine."

"When you say it like that, it's very convincing," Will laughs. "But I'm not always reliable under social pressure."

"Au contraire, mon amour, you have all the skills to excel in it. You simply haven't had the reason to use them." Hannibal guides her out of the bathroom so that they may prepare a meal downstairs together. His hand is a warm and now familiar weight at her hip, grounding them so that they make take each and every step together.

"You're so convinced I'll shine under the pressure that it's almost convincing me," Will sighs.

"There is a word for that, you know."

"What, shining under pressure?"

Hannibal smiles down at her, beneficent. "Triboluminescence: the quality of emitting light under tremendous friction or violent pressure. It appears to occur when strong chemical bonds are pulled apart, ripped, broken, or crushed. The friction and mechanical stress causes the material to impact together and produce flashes of tantalising light visible to the human eye."

"What do you know," Will remarks. "I guess there's an upside to breaking apart after all."

Hannibal has brought a jazz record from his own collection, a Francophone singer whose name escapes Will. They listen to her sing songs Will knows in English, renditions of classic Ellas and Ninas and Arethas, while they work on dinner. The dogs, having been fed, are for once not underfoot, instead resting peaceably in their living room cots. Winston is the only one sprawled near the entryway into the kitchen, watching them with affectionate canine eyes.

Will helps Hannibal prepare vegetables to pair with the halibut. "We will prepare them sous-vide," he tells her, sorting the vegetables in large bags. Carrots in one, parsnips in another, a sprig of parsley and some salt in each except for the bag that has the bok choy. Hannibal also adds garam masala to the carrots for added spice. After cooking them for an hour, Hannibal chills them in a harsh ice bath. Will is in charge of blanching the bok choy in a pot of boiling water.
As for the halibut, she assists with scaling and partitioning the fish. "Remove only the dark side of
the skin and keep the white bottom side intact," he instructs her quietly. "Remove the belly half.
Here, darling, help me portion them now."

He sears the portions, skin-side down, in a hot skillet with a fragrant mix of olive oil, rosemary,
thyme, and garlic. Two minutes, done. Afterwards, he cools them, and once cool, seals them in sous-
vide bags as well, with lemon zest and salt and generous helpings of pepper. Thirty minutes later, an
ice bath greets the fish after they are done cooking.

It's an early tasting of spring, Will realises, once they are enjoying the food on her small table by
mellow lamplight. Every high note of taste dances atop her tongue for a fleeting moment, a vision of
the bloom that brews underneath all this snow. She must make some incoherent sound of admiration,
because Hannibal looks quite pleased with himself.

"You must excuse me tomorrow morning as I will need to attend to some work-related phone calls
and paperwork," Hannibal tells her. She laughs.

"Work. I need to do that. I do have bills to pay."

Hannibal sighs, a wry smile pulling at his full lips which are, at this moment, moistened with the oils
from the food they are eating. Will has to resist the urge to lean forward and lick them. "Never before
have I procrastinated on such things. You are a terrible influence indeed, mylimasis."

"Hey, you're the one who came over!" Will accuses, grin wide.

"I simply could not resist," Hannibal sighs despondently. "I could have stayed at home to attend to
these things, except I knew I would only spend the time thinking about you. I might as well bring the
work here, where I can at least have you in my arms while I work. I have a speaking engagement in
a few weeks for which I have yet to pin down my material."

"You don't strike me as the type who requires much preparation. You could probably pull a whole
dissertation out of nowhere in one night."

Hannibal shrugs. "There is still something to be said about being adequately prepared. One never
knows what one's listeners may ask." Will notes with much amusement that he doesn't deny her
statement at all. "How about you? Have you work that needs to be done?"

"Only my whole semester," Will snorts. "I haven't finished planning out my lectures."

"Then we may work side by side."

"Parallel play?" Will chuckles.

"It holds true value," Hannibal points out. "Children do benefit by it."

Speaking of children makes Will think of the future. She thinks of it often since meeting Hannibal.
She has always been conscientious as a person of her life's overall trajectory. Recently, however, her
envisioned trajectory has shifted quite a bit.

Hannibal suddenly takes her hand, his grip warm and insistent. "Tell me what it is that has stolen
your attention from me like so."

Will smiles and flushes, almost wants to laugh, at the absurdity of their obsession with each other.
Hannibal so dislikes it when Will's attention wanders; she can't deny that the sentiment is heartily
reciprocated.
"I was thinking of the future," Will confesses. "Maudlin thoughts."

"Tell me," Hannibal implores, setting down his knife and picking up his glass of wine. His eyes glitter intently, the whole of his formidable focus turned towards her and only her. Will's blood thrills at it.

Will swallows her mouthful, takes a sip of her own wine, and considers her words. "I've always had a pretty clear idea of what I wanted to do with myself. A necessary trait to have, if you wanted to get out of the state of poverty I grew up in. And because I'm a planner—though perhaps not to the extent that you are—I've always had a clear vision of what the future looks like. But now that—now that you're with me, occasionally I'm struck at how different the future looks to me."

"Better, I hope?" Hannibal smiles.

Incredulous, Will laughs. "Are you kidding? It looks like it came alive straight out of a fairy tale. Nice house, pets, kids, the whole nine yards."

Fuck, Will thinks, once the words are out of her mouth. Well. There might have been a better way to broach that territory, Willow Graham. What the fuck.

But Hannibal appears unfazed, smile simply widening, expression wholly mellowing into a contented cast. "We can certainly invest in a house that will fit both of our lifestyles."

"What's wrong with your house?" Will blurts out again, for which she kicks herself. Her filter is nowhere to be found tonight.

Hannibal chuckles. "Nothing at all, my dear, though of course I was prepared to procure a property farther away from the heart of the city if you so wished. But if you will be content to live at my current residence, then all the better. I can renovate to accommodate whatever modifications you might desire, and there is enough space for children in the future."

Will tightens her fingers in Hannibal's warm grasp. "Do you want children?"

"I have never given children much thought beyond the abstract, I will admit—the circumstances have never been right, and I have never found the right person until you—but if you are amenable and we are fortunate enough to have any, I will happily welcome them and care for them to the very best of my ability. You are everything I could ask for in a partner; I would cherish any children you would give me."

Will's heart pounds against the cage of her ribs. This conversation has rushed far past all of her imaginings. The world momentarily blurs around her as she sees the two of them together with a child.

She wants it. She wants it with such an intense grip of longing that it scares her.

"I could be pregnant," she whispers, tongue slipping out to wet her lips. "I haven't been on the pill in a while; there hasn't been any need for so long. I haven't—I haven't tested."

Hannibal simply takes her hand and kisses it, her palm and her fingertips. She touches his lips with reverence and wonder.

"If you are, I want you to know that I am prepared to take care of you and our child to the fullest extent. I would take you to court tomorrow, if you would let me."

Will trembles with want. With herculean effort, she restrains herself. "Come on now, Hannibal, you
and I both know that you're the type who wants a full ceremony.”

"This is true. However, we can always have a ceremony afterwards."

"Not that I don't want to, but I feel like we're getting ahead of ourselves here and should have more time to think about this," Will forces out. Her fingers grip tight around Hannibal's hand again. "I want—I want that future, I really do. I hope you understand."

His eyes, they crinkle at the corners the way they do when it is a genuine, affectionate smile. Will is sure she is one of the few people who know this about him. "I do, my dear. I want it too, and you will find that I am quite persistent about things I want. We have time. There is no need to rush. Once all has fallen into place and you are comfortable to begin that life together with me, then we shall take the necessary steps. But for now, we can simply enjoy each other's nearness. Does that sound agreeable?"

Will exhales. "More than agreeable. More than I could wish for. You should know that. I want you to know that." It shakes her to the core that this man whom she so desires to have understands her so readily and is willing to accept her skittishness without question.

He kisses her hand again and then takes a sip of his wine. "Now, darling, tell me more about this new future you are envisioning for yourself. I hope I am a daily part of it?"

Will is startled into laughter; Winston raises his head from the floor at the sudden sound. "Oh, yes, dear, you are there for almost every waking moment."

"Good. Keep going," Hannibal encourages, before taking a bite of his halibut. His eyes dance, his smile brightening into a more playful one.

Will keeps chuckling for a while, managing to describe some of her tamer expectations in between bites of her food. "I imagine many onerous years of academia for both of us, of course, what with you and your multitudinous degrees..."

"Are you perchance considering a doctorate? You are beyond qualified; you would do wonderfully."

Will nods. "I've always intended to pursue a doctorate, it was just a matter of adjustment. Juggling a field and a teaching role takes more work than I expected. I'll have to give up one or the other, eventually, if I want to go for a doctorate. If Jack has anything to say about it, I'll give up teaching and remain leading his team."

"A well-deserved position, certainly. What doctorate are you looking to acquire?"

"Either anthropology or criminology. GWU has programs and they already know me, it would be an easy transition."

"Anthropology is such a fascinating subject," Hannibal agrees with pleasure. "I am almost tempted to partake in study with you."

Will laughs. "Please, don't. You have enough degrees, Hannibal Lecter, MD, et al. Besides, I have a feeling I'll be using you as a sounding board, anyway." Her tone is still hesitant because she's unused to the optimistic assumption that they will still be together that far into the future. They are talking about more than a year from the present. What audacious thoughts.

But then Hannibal promises her, "I am with you every step of the way," and when he says it like that, it is very hard for Will to hold on to her skepticism. In his presence, she finds it safe to believe.
"Thank you," she smiles. "Dessert?"

"Dessert," he agrees.

Their weekend ends all too quickly, and though their parting is no easier than before—in fact, it's getting harder each time—they are both bolstered by the knowledge that they will be seeing each other again soon. Next weekend, Will is coming to Hannibal's house, establishing a rhythm that will work for the both of them, alternating weekends at each other's house. In the interest of preparation, she pre-books her dog-sitter the moment Hannibal leaves her house. The sitter is understandably delighted to be hired for more than just a day, easy money for watching such well-trained dogs.

Will returns to campus on Monday morning, and though classes do not start until the following day, she prepares her slideshows and walks Ariadne through her methodology. It's a beautiful boon to have an intern when they are a capable one; Will takes full advantage of the help and finds that the days are much lighter when the work is divided between two.

Beverly comes to eat lunch with them everyday, seeking entertainment because she's bored out of her mind without an active case. "Jack has us cataloguing old cases, if you can believe it. Nothing even remotely interesting. I am seriously overqualified for this kind of work."

"Mr. Price likes it, though," Ariadne points out, delicately biting into her sandwich.

"Uhh, Jimmy's weird like that, and please I beg you to stop calling him 'Mr. Price.' It sounds creepy and vaguely serial killer-y," Beverly shudders.

Will snorts some of her iced tea and has to endure a bit of a coughing fit. Ariadne only does a series of rapid blinks. "But he's a very nice person," she says.

"Yeah, I never contested that, I just, you know what, never you mind, child." Beverly exchanges a look with Will, who is too busy attempting to clear her airway and prevent from laughing at the same time. "Jesus, this place collects such special people."

Special though she is, Ariadne proves herself a highly capable teaching assistant, taking over some of Will's easier lectures in the beginner classes by Wednesday. Will notes that while sometimes halting, Ariadne teaches like she is telling a story, which keeps the students engaged and attentive, thereby achieving what most lecturers fail to even touch. Will makes sure to tell her so at the end of the class, because excellence merits recognition in order to flourish.

On Thursday at noon, Jack stops by at Will's office to check on her. "Everything alright? Settling into the classes?"

"All good, Jack, thanks for asking. Though surely you didn't come all the way to campus just to ask about me," Will prompts, offering Jack her seat. She perches against her desk and sips at her coffee. Ariadne is still out to lunch.

"No, I just needed your signature," Jack hands her a file; she puts down her coffee to flip through it. "I'm formally instating Beverly and she'll be answering to you. She's done well enough, don't you think?"
Will breaks out into a smile, readily taking a pen from her desk and scribbling her signature where it's required. "More than well enough. She's an excellent hand, Jack. She'll make for an excellent SSA in the future."

"Yes, well, Special Agent Katz for now, until she gets her formal experience in," Jack grunts, taking the file back from her hands. "It's unorthodox, given her CSI background, but not unheard of. Teach her whatever you can."

"What little teaching she needs," Will snorts, still sporting the smile. "And don't deny it, you like growing little agents, Jack. That's just what you do. You've been cultivating her for a while, you just haven't had the right set of circumstances to advance her until now."

"Yes, well, given your streak, it seems you work well together, and I figured you needed a partner before it gets too overwhelming," Jack grunts, rising from the chair. "Field agents work in teams of two after all."

Will nods. "When will you tell her?"

"I'll catch her tomorrow morning. She formally starts Monday next week. Do me a favour and don't ruin the surprise."

"Sure thing, Jack," Will laughs, just as Ariadne comes in.

"Oh, good day, Chief Crawford," she greets somewhat formally, blinking in her usual manner of sleepy surprise.

"Miss Black," Jack nods back, defaulting to formality because Ariadne makes everyone feel that way except Beverly. "Will."

They watch him disappear down the hallway, and when his stocky form is gone from sight, Ariadne turns to Will. "Do we have a case?"

"No," Will smiles, "he was just here on other official business and had some paperwork for me to sign. Good lunch?"

"Oh, yes, very good, thank you for asking," Ariadne smiles.

Quietly, they return to work. Will smiles for the rest of the afternoon, happy for her friend and likely giving Ariadne cause to wonder. She keeps the news quiet as promised, only telling Hannibal that night over the phone. They spend over an hour talking about everything and nothing; Will falls asleep to his voice.

Her phone rings while she's on the road the next day; it's Beverly, as she expected. Will answers and there is an immediate, deafening yell from the other side.

"DID YOU KNOW?"

Will laughs. "Congratulations, Bev. It's well-deserved."
"OH MY GOD," Beverly continues to yell; she must be outside or in the bathrooms, because otherwise people would have shushed her already. Or she could be in public and, in typical Beverly fashion, just beyond care. "I'M A SPECIAL AGENT."

Will talks with her until she's pulling into the faculty parking lot at Quantico. They agree on a celebratory lunch, because Beverly knows there is little chance of Will being convinced out for drinks at night. Beverly's ebullient mood is infectious enough to tide Will over until she can go stay at Hannibal's house again.

It is near unmanageable now, this level of desire. If Will focuses hard enough, she can feel the solid weight of it deep in her gut, where a burgeoning heat now rests dormant until Hannibal's touch.

All morning at Quantico, Will floats through her routine and imagines her coming evening. She will knock on Hannibal's door and the door will open to their mutual relief, their complimentary desire. In such moments, Hannibal is so momentary, so condensed—and yet there seems no end to him whenever they are together. They will talk and eat and later lie in bed together, hands on each other, words whispered into skin. Possible, impossible. Nothing to do about it but to flow. Happiness, perhaps; there's a likely name.

Ariadne joins them for lunch. The burger joint is Beverly's favourite, not too far from Quantico. People packed in from wall to wall, but Beverly gets a windowside table for them and somehow it works for Will, who does enjoy her meal despite the crowd around them. Beverly regales Ariadne of her story, motivations and aspirations in entirety, while Will listens in content silence. It must be nice, she thinks, having nothing to hide.

She stuffs her mouth with fries before she can say anything stupid. For once, she wants to just be genuinely happy for her friend.

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Everything is as she imagined when she arrives at Hannibal's house that evening, with the one notable exception: Signora Sineni is in the house. Will has forgotten that the dress is to be fitted today. Hannibal allows them the guest bedroom for privacy; Signora Sineni is adamant that the dress remain a surprise for him, and that he should only see it on the night of the opera itself. Will almost wants to tell the signora that it's only the opera, except even she understands the significance of the event. Hannibal is introducing her into his world as a formal companion, which to everyone will indicate a certain level of commitment that they have only once spoken of.

"Clothes off, please," Signora Sineni directs her. Will jolts and starts stripping. "I have taken the liberty of procuring for you a pair of matching shoes." At her surprised look, the signora adds, "The doctor sent me your measurements."

Will flushes, more embarrassed by that than her near-nakedness. "Okay. Um. So how do you—er, how do we do this?"

The signora unzips the tall black garment bag she has laid out on the bed, revealing the dress to Will for the first time. At once, she recalls the signora's odd questions and is struck by the woman's talent. "It's... you brought my words to life." Will swallows with an audible click. "Or should I say, you wove a work of art with them."
Signora Sineni smiles at her. "The garment should reflect the owner and not the other way around. In order to be worn well, it must be an extension of you. If you do not form a connection with it, the silk will simply be silk, instead of becoming your second skin, your armour, your gild. Now, why don't I help you try it on?"

Despite being the bulkiest and most grandiose piece of clothing Will has ever worn, the dress is surprisingly easy to put on. The signora sets out the matching shoes on the floor—matte black stilettos, elegant and formal—Will gingerly slips into them, completing the look according to the signora's design. She turns and looks at herself in the mirror—

"No," Will says, "that can't be me."

Even without make-up, even without fixing her hair, even with just the dress, she looks... *I look like someone who is part of his world.*

Will presses her lips together. She is sure that the signora has tailored a matching outfit for Hannibal. She will wear this fine piece of art and walk beside him, the two of them a pair, and she can see that it will look as though they were always meant to be. The thought makes her tremble with *want.*

"When you fix your hair, make sure these curls of yours have volume and shine. Your make-up should be minimal; you don't need much. Just a little bit to even out your complexion, something to highlight those eyes, ah, yes, and a little bit of blush here, to bring a healthy glow to your visage. Leave these collarbones bare. You require no jewellery, except perhaps a ring from the doctor?"

Will burns bright red once again, ducking her chin down but saying nothing to deny the possibility. Hannibal *did* threaten to marry her once already.

With soft laughter, the signora directs her to walk, sit, shift, and move about while in the dress. Once assured that all fits well and the cloth falls the way it should around her body, Signora Sineni orders her out of it so that it may be packed away once more.

"Thank you," Will says as she puts her normal clothes back on. "This dress will be the most beautiful thing I'll wear in my life."

"Oh, I do sincerely doubt that," Signora Sineni chuckles, straightening to regard her with twinkling eyes. "This will be the first of many, many gifts from the doctor, you should know. He is not a man who makes a decision like you lightly. Come, let us tell him of the good news."

Will nods, closing the bedroom door behind her and following the signora along the hall. Downstairs, Hannibal emerges from the kitchen at the beckon of their footsteps.

"I take it all is well?" he asks with a smile. Will goes to him, unable to stop herself; likewise, he reaches for her and tucks her body against his side.

"Simply marvelous, Hannibal; you are in for quite a pleasant surprise," the signora teases.

"Excellent. Thank you as always, Silvia, for your talent and hard work. Shall we settle the particulars in the usual manner?"

"That'll do, yes." She shakes Will's hand and exchanges a cheek-to-cheek with Hannibal at the foyer. "I shan't overstay; there is work to be done at the studio. Should you encounter any problems with the dress, however, you must give me a call."

They send her off with warm regards. Still overwhelmed by the grandeur of the dress, Will winds her arms around Hannibal and puts her cheek against his chest, closing her eyes such that she may
immerse herself only in the sound of his blood and breath. Humming, Hannibal holds her there, the two of them locked in a stationary embrace. He is ushering her existence into his world and the pace of it terrifies Will, but she won't have it any other way. She can't have it any other way. This is what she needs. Having Hannibal in her life is what she needs.

_I would like to be the air that inhabits you for a moment only. I would like to be that unnoticed and that necessary._

( Margaret Atwood, "Variation on the Word Sleep"

Excepting the Sunday she spent locked indoors with Hannibal, Will's week unfolds slowly and with agonizing pain. Every morning she wakes with her head pounding; every evening, she goes into fitful sleep.

"Maybe you caught a bug," Beverly suggests at lunch on Tuesday, looking her over with a critical eye. "Wouldn't be the only one in this weather."

"It feels like it, but no cough, no sniffs, no sore throat," Will sighs, cradling her steaming cup of tea. Ariadne had made it for her, a potent blend of green tea with some sort of citrus and honey. "I mean, I can function; I just feel like shit while functioning."

"At least we don't have a case," Beverly points out. "Imagine having to be out there chasing down a psycho right now."

They look out through the cafeteria's windows, which are partially frosted over and offer a bleak landscape of greys and whites. Winter still has a firm grip on the seaboard.

"So on Saturday afternoon, we need to go out," Beverly begins.

"What?"

"Spa, girl, before your opera night! So we can get you all pretty! Or have you forgotten already?"

Will gives her a look; it's rather hard to forget. "What do I need spa for?"

"Willow Graham," Beverly frowns, "you need to put in some effort for your good man, alright? Especially if you want to keep him!"

"Well, I do," Will acquiesces.

"So spa day! I know a place. Not one of those lame white people places, but one of my people's
places. Get you pampered with some high-end Korean skin care, wax everything, get your hair
trimmed and your face done, you'll be ready for your big night! One stop shop, I promise, this place
is really good," Beverly boasts, eliciting chuckles from Will.

"If you say so."

"I say so. Your man will appreciate it," and here Beverly adds a suggestive leer, which makes Will
blush.

"Hannibal doesn't—doesn't really seem to, er, be particular about my, uh, habits?" Will manages, all
the while avoiding Beverly's eyes. She observes the single tea stalk floating upright in her cup and
remembers reading somewhere that such a thing is a sign of good luck. She thinks, I'll be needing it.
"He hasn't expressed a preference, you know, either way."

"Whether you should be hairless or not, whether you should primp yourself or stay as you are?"
Beverly bluntly clarifies. Will flushes redder but nods. "Well, that's probably because he's a proper
modern gentleman and wouldn't dare dictate to you how you should keep your body. But like any
man, he has preferences, girl, you just gotta find out what they are."

In a flash of warm memory, Will recalls Hannibal skirting his nose against her neck, holding her and
murmuring quietly into her skin. She says, "He doesn't like it when I wear scented lotions.
Something about the taste and the smell."

Beverly leers at her again.

Will clears her throat, shifts and ducks her head again. "Anyway, uh. Where is this place? Saturday
afternoon, you said?"

"Near downtown DC, Saturday at two. Should be enough time to get you back home by five."

Pulling out her phone, Will texts Hannibal to let him know. He's expecting her to stay over on Friday
night, but surely he won't mind if Will just comes on Saturday afternoon. It would be more
convenient that way.

The rest of the week passes in a haze. She doesn't lose time again, but her nightly fevers are
becoming bad enough that she soaks through her shirt into her sheets. Every morning, she starts
taking a vitamin C and zinc supplement per recommendation from Hannibal. She also cycles through
round the clock extra-strength Tylenol, one dose every four hours, to control the fevers. At least the
blisters on her arm are almost gone. The dogs can tell she is sick; they mill around her and act
subdued, at night crawling up into the bed to sleep around her in a pile.

But Will is determined to beat it, whatever bug it is. She cannot afford to be sick. Hannibal would
mourn her missing the opera, so she puts conscious effort into getting better. After work everyday,
she goes straight home, taking only a moment to walk the dogs and then turning in for a shower,
dinner, then sleep. Though the sleep is fitful, she rests the whole night, twelve-hour stretches spent in
bed or on the couch to allow her body to redirect its resources towards fighting the infection.
Hannibal laments his inability to be there for her while she convalesces, but Will remains firm against
his sweet words, forbidding him from driving all the way to her house after his long shifts at work. It
wouldn't do for him to overtire himself or get into an accident on the way; he, too, needs to rest.

By the end of the week she feels better; even Beverly agrees. "You don't look like death warmed
over anymore!" They meet up on Saturday as promised, Will bidding the dog-sitter a good weekend
so she can brave the slush to the DC spa Beverly prefers. Warmer weather brings more people
outside instead of avoiding the cold; the city is already looking forward to a respite.
At the spa, which is fancier than Will had expected (though she should have known it would be), they are ushered in and treated like queens. The staff is mostly comprised of smartly-dressed Asian women with whom Beverly speaks in rapid-fire Korean, mentioning Will's name several times and causing much excitement to mill around them. Will is given a bathrobe and told to take her clothes off in a dressing room. Then she is motioned to a spa chair where, upon sitting down, they ask her to pick colors for her nails, massage oils for her feet, treatments for her hair, and would she like a drink while she is being taken care of?

"Best get used to it, girl," Beverly grins. "You're going out with Dr. Debonair, after all."

Though she can’t contradict the statement, Will sends Beverly an unamused look. If Hannibal's social schedule is anything like she imagines it, there will be plenty of public appearances like the opera and the exhibit, and while Hannibal is generous enough not to force her to go to every single one, Will wants to be there with him, she wants to be there for him. After all, these are things that Hannibal enjoys, and she wants him to be happy.

"How often do you come here?" Will asks out of curiosity, because the place is high-end and coming often would likely take a sizable chunk out of Beverly's income.

"Oh, only once every month or so? If I wore fancy manicure all the time, I'd be here more often, but manicure would be ruined at the lab, so I'm just here for the massages and the hair treatments, or if there's a special occasion. I'm actually not that girly, you know," Beverly grins.

The massage is Will's favorite part. It comes later, after they finish with her hair and nails and waxing. She lays naked and partially covered on the table, face down and groaning with each pass of firm hands parallel to her spine. Why did she not do this before? Skilled fingers work through each knot on every muscle, smoothing them away until she feels untangled and languid, warm and once more a citizen of her own skin.

The therapist talks to Will while she works. "You carry a lot of tension, young lady. Your shoulders, your back, your hips. Work is important, yes, but you are important also. You must take care of yourself."

Will hums, face easing into a smile. Hannibal says that to her everyday. The therapist works strong fingers up her spine until they arrive at her neck. "Inhale," she is told, and as she does, intense pressure clamps down on two knots she didn't even know existed, the pain of it mounting, mounting, until finally it crests and breaks and a hot, white heat sears up her skull to rest behind her eyes. Raggedly, she releases the breath she was holding. Something inside her clicks back into place.

"Much better," the therapist declares, satisfied. Will feels a warm blanket pulled up to cover her shoulders. "Rest for a few minutes. When you hear the bell, slowly rise and drink this glass of water. I shall wait for you outside."

Will does as she is told. When she rises from the table, her entire body feels loose, her mind clear and her breath coming easy. She hasn't felt this good in months. Reminding herself to treat Beverly to dinner next time, she puts on her clothes and steps outside to find them ready for her at the last stop.

"Makeup time!" Beverly declares, having just finished her own massage and now nursing her third drink. "Girl, this is high society. Your dress is your armor; your man is your shield; but your makeup? Your makeup is the fucking sword. We gotta get your battle wings on."

The makeup artist laughs, obviously on good terms with Beverly, but Will shakes her head. "The dress' designer said to keep it minimal. The dress is kind of grand, so she's probably right."
Beverly whistles. "He got you a designer dress?"

Will flushes. "Tailored."

"Ooh, girl," Beverly exchanges a look with the makeup artist. "Pics or it didn't happen."

"Well, I guess it didn't happen, then..."

"Willow Graham! Hand over the pictures!" Beverly demands, grabbing her by the arms to shake.

"Okay, alright!" Laughing, Will pulls up pictures on her phone, which Beverly crows over. The makeup artist peers at it and then eyes Will's bare face.

"Deep, dark reds with some brown-golds, I think. We'll contour a little to highlight those fine bones of yours. Don't worry, darling, you'll be a jewel once we're done."

It doesn't take long at all. Will submits herself to the artist's ministrations, Beverly's cheerful alcohol-abetted chatter washing over her as she thinks of the coming night. Maybe her nerves are obvious; Beverly puts a hand on her shoulder when the makeup is done.

"Look at you," Beverly smiles at her, admiring. "Goddamn, Graham."

"Yeah?" Will smiles, trying not to look at herself in the mirror.

"Yeah, girl. You're gorgeous. You'll rock this."

Beverly is a phenomenal friend. Will marvels at how fortunate she is to have such a friend. At checkout, the staff bids them a good night, handing Will a calling card for future occasions. The sun is hovering over the horizon when they step outside; Will surprises even herself as she pulls Beverly into a quick hug before they separate. "Thanks, Bev. My treat for dinner next time."

"Of course!" Beverly says, startled but also happy. It shows in the way her cheek dimples at the strength of her grin. "Now go, drive safely, and knock Dr. Debonair's brains out with your gorgeousness. Go! Don't be late, that's unladylike!"

Will drives to Baltimore with a smile. Beverly has no business scolding anyone for being unladylike.

Arriving at Hannibal's house, Will comes to the door nervous. Why, she has no clue; it's hardly the first time she's here to stay for a few nights. But somehow she feels more conspicuous tonight, which must be her imagination; nevertheless she feels as though the whole neighborhood is watching her walk up to Hannibal's door.

"Hello, my dear," he greets, always with a firm embrace. The tension doesn't fall from her shoulders as it usually does; he puts his face into her hair and hums. "It is a little after five; there is some time. Are you hungry? Or would you rather retire upstairs and prepare?"

"Uh, I'd better go get ready," Will nervously chuckles. "Who knows what miniature disaster I might create. I don't exactly do this very often."
"Very well," Hannibal chuckles. "I will bring you a small snack, which is always a good idea before the opera. Their drinks are passable, but their hors d'oeuvres are abysmal."

His naked contempt for the food makes Will laugh all the way up the stairs. Hannibal can be such a ridiculous brat about certain things. It makes him only more endearing, a quiet characteristic only a few people must know about him.

Will deposits her bags in Hannibal's room but retires to the guest room to prepare. The dress is still in the closet where she left it last week. She goes to the bathroom and removes her clothes, standing naked under the white light critiquing herself for a while. She's denigrating the state of her knobbly knees when Hannibal audibly excuses himself into the room with the snacks.

"Your food, darling; please do eat something before we go."

"I will," she assures him. "Now shoo; the signora says the dress is supposed to be a surprise!"

Hannibal chuckles, leaving the room with a click of the door. Will sighs and returns to her reflection in the tall mirror. Alright. Knobbly knees or not, we've gotta do this right.

First, she brushes her teeth and reapplys the lip color; she lathers on lotion and fixes her hair. Then the lingerie, which came with the dress and encourages her body to blush as red as her face when she puts it on.

Stepping beyond the bathroom brings goosebumps to her arms and legs. Feeling absurdly as if she needs to tiptoe around the place, she fetches the heels from its shoebox and sets them out on the floor before turning to the dress. Thankfully, it is made for winter weather; she will not have to suffer the cold outside with bare shoulders.

The gown is made of thick dark silk, almost black but not quite, with a blood red sheen under the right light. Coral-like embroidery in burgundy thread spiders across it in a large repeating pattern, curving to surround clam shells embroidered likewise but in bright gold. Something about her introverted nature, surely; the red corals look almost as if they are cupping the shells, protective and covetous. From afar, the corals could be the dead branches of winter trees, or the antlers of a large stag.

When she walks, her leg slips partway out through a high front slit intended to showcase bare skin. The dress is with an empire waist silhouette; it bares her shoulders but also comes with a cloak that is made of the same intricately embroidered cloth. Will suspects that the gold thread is actually gold thread, but just resolves not to think about it.

Putting it on by herself feels different somehow. Silk glides over her bare skin; it feels like sinking into a cool pond under moonlight. With some effort, she zips up the dress and runs her hands down the front, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles because it helps fix the creases in her mask. When she finally goes to the mirror, the person looking back at her is a familiar stranger: Will as what she can become, what she will become, soon enough.

Inhale, exhale. The full power of her imagination, unlatched, set free. Will needs to absorb into herself, shaping possibility into reality.

Hannibal knocks once on the door. "I will wait downstairs, darling."

Will lets go and becomes.
Ah, there he is. Her handsome, dignified gentleman, all sleek lines and stark contrasts, awaiting her with patient at the foot of the stairs. His tuxedo is black throughout, vest and shirt, except the tie and pocket square, which are both burgundy to match the corals on her dress. The signora has outdone herself.

Hannibal looks up and sees her as she descends; his face transforms. Hunger, pure and vivid, darkening his eyes; awe and joy, smug satisfaction. Their eyes do not leave each other, and when they are face to face, there are no need for words. Hannibal reaches up and strokes her cheek with his knuckles. Will smiles.

They leave the house in a reverent silence. Inside his car, they are both suspended in a circle of wonder, a sober intimacy; breathing a word would be breaking the spell. When his hand is not on the stick shift, it is holding hers between them.

Arriving at the opera house feels too soon. Hannibal debarks and surrenders the car to the valet, coming around to extend an arm to her as she gingerly steps out. The cloak swishes around her ankles as they come to stand together, a matching pair.

What a vision they must be. He holds her there at the steps for a moment, arm around her waist, unheeding of the cold as he looks into her face. Perhaps he is admiring the image they make just the same as Will does.

"Look at you," he finally says, quiet as a whisper.

"Look at us," Will corrects him.

He smiles, dark and promising. "Oh, they will, darling. But that is all they can do. Now come. Allow me to show you off to the world."

They ascend the steps into the fray. It's alright; Will's mind remains clear and sharp. Her shoulders are level despite the intensity of the attention directed towards them. At the entrance hall, Will sheds and surrenders her coat to the concierge. Hannibal confirms their reservations as he also removes his scarf and gloves. His arm comes back to curl around her at once, tugging her close and tucking them together. The way he holds her waist is proprietary and unmistakable, but Will doesn't mind. She feels safer, more anchored, with him at her side.

"See anyone important?" Will murmurs, eyes sweeping the room as they enter the atrium. She snags a drink from a passing server. More to occupy her hand than anything else. The people here all look as though they bathe in dollar bills, but her unerring vision shatters their superficial illusions. All the rotten ones, she can pick them out. All the leeches, the hangers on, the directionless socialites and the rich bored brats, the pretentious assholes hiding underneath a frail veneer of sensibility and finesse—well. Will disagrees. Hannibal has finesse. All they have is an inelegant artifice.

"Important is such a relative term," Hannibal rejoins, tilting a smile down at her. Only for her, she notes with delight; to others, his expression is unchanged. He retains his public mask, congenial and aristocratic. The lines of his shoulders are relaxed but his form nonetheless cuts a ferocious frame, distinguishing him from the complaisant slouches and the stiff posturings scattered about the room.

Will, for her part, has not bothered to secure a faux smile or a welcoming expression. It will fail anyway. Instead, she schools her face into resting contemplation, which she hopes appears less
dreamy and more sober to befit her partner.

"Well, everyone else seems to think you're important. They've been staring since the car."

"I know, darling, it's almost quite rude, isn't it?" he remarks, mild as you please.

"Liar," Will snorts, "you like it, you peacock."

Hannibal chuckles but does not deny. They navigate around small groups of people, Hannibal sometimes exchanging nods and passing pleasantries to acquaintances. But it isn't long before one of his closer associates spot them.

"is that who I think it is? Hannibal Lecter! Come here, young man. You owe me an explanation as to why you've been so elusive!"

Hannibal steers her towards where an older Asian lady has been holding miniature court. "Komeda-san, konbanwa. Will, this is Komeda-san, an old friend of mine who lives in Boston with her husband. She provides us with scintillating literary material whenever her dreams and her felines provide her with inspiration." The small crowd titters, already rearranging themselves to turn towards Hannibal instead. Like sunflowers turning to the risen sun. "Komeda-san, this is Will. I believe the term youngsters use these days is 'girlfriend'?"

Mrs. Komeda laughs alongside the others, all of them more than mildly incredulous. Clearly, Hannibal used to come alone. "Why, I never!" she exclaims. "Are you quite unwell, young man?"

Almost quite rude, Will echoes Hannibal's words, but she's funny. "He's a fool, is what he is," she remarks, stunning them all momentarily stupid. "But a fool can have his charms, I suppose. Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Komeda. I'm the girlfriend."

"Well," a balding middle-aged man snorts from beside Hannibal, "a woman who can call you a fool. You, of all people! Surely she's a keeper."

"Good evening, Michael. You are quite correct; I do intend to keep her," Hannibal indulges. "Will, this is Dr. Michael Albertson and his wife Dr. Susan Albertson; colleagues from med school days."

Michael Albertson shakes Will's hand, adding, "Also technically your boss, you know," which receives chuckles and some good-natured ribbing. But the fact that he has to say it tells all. Hannibal holds the upper hand in this relationship.

"What is this about a girl I hear?" someone calls out, a tall blond gentleman in a blue suit who proceeds to insinuate himself into the group. "Hannibal, finally?"

"Dr. Donald Sutcliffe, a colleague from residency," Hannibal tells Will. "Don, this is Will."

"Will Graham, pleased to meet you," she responds on rote, reaching out for a handshake. It's damp and clammy.

"Graham! Any relation to the Grahams of Great Falls?" Don Sutcliffe asks, enthusiasm a touch too bright. Will sees right through it.

"None whatsoever. I'm just Will Graham, if that's what you wanted to know."

"You can't be just anything," Michael Albertson snorts again, "not with Hannibal, of all people."

Rude, Will thinks.
"Come now, young man," Mrs. Komeda entreats, laying a hand on Hannibal's arm. "You must at least indulge us a bit of a story. Otherwise, what shall the gossip mill subsist upon for the next few weeks? Surely you can find a shred of sympathy for our plight."

_Also rude_, Will smiles, _but she's really funny._

"There isn't much to it. I found her by pure chance at the museum."

"Yes," Will drily adds, "dusty old relic that I am, I was having quite an enjoyable night hidden away on a top shelf by myself, and then comes along this sentimental fool with his prosaic intellectualisms, plucking me from my quiet little corner. You can imagine my abject discontent."

"Prosaic," laughs Mrs. Albertson, who is taller and appears more circumspect compared to her husband.

"A sentimental fool, she called you!" Mrs. Komeda exclaims. "Could it be that she has seen through to the heart of you, Hannibal Lecter?"

Hannibal surprises all of them bar Will when he acquiesces. "I believe she has. She's singular, my Will."

A low murmur runs across the group before Don Sutcliffe pipes up again. "So, Miss Will Singular Graham, what is it that you do? We're all mostly doctors here, and, you know, only a special breed of people can put up with us. You've got us all curious!"

_Oh, what an asshole._ Will decides to shoot his condescension down. "What a coincidence; I also have a hard time finding people who can keep up. I work for the FBI. Special agent. We're a small population, criminal profilers. Most people can't stand us because they hate being read like an open book; Hannibal, on the other hand, has enough pages with enough substance to keep me reading for a while. It's actually rather refreshing, he's quite unique," she smiles. Hannibal chuckles quietly beside her.

Don Sutcliffe's face shutters as Mrs. Komeda and her husband both erupt in laughter. "You keep him on his toes, don't you?"

"I rather prefer him on his back." Gasps, laughter. Will adds, "Trying to deny that it's an innuendo will make it into an even bigger innuendo—" more laughter, "—but I do so enjoy winning against him, that's what I meant. It's rare these days to find men who present a challenge, wouldn't you agree?"

"Entirely true!" Mrs. Komeda declares, taking Will by the arms. "Young lady, I do hope we shall see more of you in the future. Such intelligent company! And here I was just last week despairing of this man's prospects for the future; I see my concern was for naught. What excellent developments. Only further proof that it's been too long since the last time you properly cooked for us, Hannibal." The statement draws another round of murmuring, this time palpably excited.

Hannibal dips his head in apology. "You are, of course, always welcome to come over and I will cook for you, Komeda-san."

"I said _properly,_" Mrs. Komeda points out, "which means dinner _and_ the show." She turns to Will. "Have you seen him cook, young lady? It's an entire performance. He used to throw such exquisite dinner parties," she sighs longingly.

"I've helped him cook," Will smiles.
Hannibal rubs his hand up Will's bare arm. "Will is a capable sous chef."

"Well," Mrs. Komeda coyly smiles at her, "high praise, indeed. But you heard me: used to."

"And I will again," Hannibal promises, "once the inspiration strikes."

"Oh, come now, surely your lovely young lady provides you enough daily inspiration! She deserves to be celebrated, if anything for snagging the most celebrated bachelor of Baltimore!"

*Pushing it, Will thinks. Must be really good cooking for her to beg so hard.*

But Mrs. Komeda must be worth cultivating as an acquaintance if she has been to Hannibal's dinner table. He wouldn't keep tedious company unless for some sort of equivalent or greater benefit.

"At some point in the spring, perhaps."

"I shall hold you to that," Mrs. Komeda warns. And then, suddenly spotting someone across the room, she brightens. "Here comes the Francos. Come, Will—may I call you Will? —let us introduce you to the Francos and the Chens."

Thereafter comes a string of introductions and pleasantries: the Francos, a political husband-and-wife; the Chens, a business family; Miss Hall, a novelist friend of Mrs. Komeda's and Hannibal's; the Okafors, a South African couple who are both doctors. Will can tell who has been to Hannibal's table and who has not; that privilege has created a subtle delineation of hierarchy in their growing little group. Hannibal's degree of influence is greater and more insidious than Will had initially suspected. Beyond the figurative, he has them all eating out of the palm of his hand.

*He is a Count, Will reminds herself, and maybe some of them are aware of that. Or at the very least, they know that he's old European money.*

And what does that tell them about her? What sort of woman does old European money pick? Not her sort, surely, but here she is, standing beside him in a place of honor no one else has held before. Will thrills inside, turning her body into Hannibal by instinct. Hannibal is hers.

Before long, they announce the show's imminent beginning overhead. It is Gounod's Faust in the original French, performed by traveling company from Vienna. The French is old but familiar enough to allow Will a partial understanding of the libretto. Hannibal has, of course, secured a box right-center of the stage for the best acoustics and an expansive view. There are no numbered cubicles inside, instead only a wide loveseat awaiting the two of them. The box is intended just for two. Will is soon tucked against Hannibal's side, snug and warm as the chandeliers above them recede into the ceiling to form a cinematic star-studded dome.

A hush descends over the hall, and along with it, a sense of absolute calm and safety over Will. Secure in his embrace, confident of his affections, and certain of their shared future, she exhales the last of her worries away; the opening act begins.

She has forgotten how beautiful it can be. She hasn't allowed the wonder to take her over like this in a long time. Her eyes peel open to see at the dizzying height of her perception, and for the first time since she was a young child, it does not hurt to look. Here there is nothing but beauty and art, motion in music, a story in telling, the full spectrum of human emotion.

Can she fault Faust for preferring the human to the divine? The spectrum is bigger and so much fuller, all shades of color possible because there is darkness too. Perhaps Faust understood best, far more than any of them do, what truly counts in life. What worth is moral integrity if it precludes good company? What worth is divinity if there is nothing more beyond? Far better to be imperfect, then, to
be broken, to be incomplete. Far better to be incomplete together.

Of course Faust repents at the end. Perhaps Will is misinterpreting, missing the point. But, as she leans her head against Hannibal's shoulder, as she twines their fingers together, she is content to miss that point. She has all she wants right here. Heart full and soul happy, she closes her eyes and soars away with the violins.

Dinner is almost jarringly mellow after that. Just the two of them at home in Baltimore, feasting with private laughter. A crown of roast pork served with lady apples and shallots; rich red wine painting floral landscapes upon her tongue; the warm weight of Hannibal's thumb against her lower lip. Will doesn't know how long they talk, only that they do, about anything and everything, about nothing at all. All night, he keeps touching her with a degree of reverence more appropriate for something holy and divine. Will is neither; he begs to differ.

"You are the most divine creature I have ever met," Hannibal insists. "I will not suffer you denigrating yourself so. I will convince you. Wait and see."

Will laughs again, cheeks warm and heart full. She has laughed so much since they got home. "You can be such a brat sometimes, you know that?"

The look of affront on Hannibal's face is enough to send her into another bout of laughter.

Later, when they retire as they usually do to his study, Hannibal puts on a quiet piano record and then swings her around as if to dance.

"Are we dancing?" she smiles. "Your music is too slow."

"Not just yet, my dear," he kisses against her jaw. "I have something for you first."

"Oh, Hannibal," she says, though it's but a token protest. She can't do much if he insists on it, can she? She can't reject him.

It is a small box, small enough for jewelry, though it shouldn't be another necklace. She already has that. It's upstairs—she didn't wear it in obeisance to the signora's advice—pearl earrings, perhaps? That seems like something Hannibal would give.

But Hannibal flicks the box open and Will has to admit that it could've only been this. The signora had warned her. Inside the box, tucked between black silk, sits an elaborate filigree ring.

Hannibal takes the ring from its nest first and then her hand. "Alexandrite above three carats is extremely rare. But, as I was told, nothing was too fine for my great great grandfather to acquire if it was for his wife, who lived a life bedecked in treasures. He commissioned this gemstone, one of the first alexandrites in the world and still the largest, to be cut and set into a ring for her. It was the height of the Russian empire then. They mined the stones from the Ural Mountains, a long and arduous journey away from where this would find its home in our ancestral hold. This ring has been worn by the Lecter line's matriarch as a sign of the bloodline's highest favor. My mother wore it until her death. I have kept it since then; I hope now that you will wear it for me."

Will flexes her fingers to test the weight of it. The band is larger than most modern rings and far more
ornate, finely detailed scrollwork indicating the ring's worth just as much as the gem itself does. Under the study's firelight, the alexandrite winks at her, here appearing a vibrant wine red but perhaps a different color under the sun.

"Is this what I think it means?" Will asks, looking finally up at Hannibal, who watches her intently and with more than a little eager apprehension.

"Shall I ask the question, then?"

"Should I answer?"

"I would be much obliged to hear it," Hannibal says, "and I look only for one answer."

Will laughs, shaky and incredulous. "You're demanding."

"I have come to realize that you will not surrender if I do not demand it."

Clearing her throat, Will retorts, "I was under the impression that documents are required to make such things formal for families such as yours."

"Oh, the pre-nups are ready, my dear. We can review them as soon as tomorrow morning, if you feel so inclined."

Will drops her head forward. "Damn it all, Hannibal," she whispers, but her fingers are curled tight around his, and the thought of removing that ring from her finger now makes her chest hurt. "How do you expect me to refuse?"

"I don't," he hums, pulling her close, gently so that her dress does not crease. She feels a soft kiss land upon her temple. "Let me take care of you, Will. Let me have you. Let me stay by your side."

They stand there in silence for a moment, until Will remembers how to nod. She nods. The movement is minute against his shoulder, so she clears her throat and says, "Okay."

Hannibal pulls away a fraction, just enough to look her in the eyes.

"Okay," Will says, voice faint but gut certain, blinking up at this man who has stolen her heart entirely. It's too late now, anyway. The only way out is by breaking apart. And oh, wouldn't that be a violent vision, if they were to break apart? A cataclysm, a forceful shearing, like bones breaking under the crushing force of a fall. Gravity, friction, fireworks. Triboluminescence.

Hannibal rests their foreheads together, eyes closing in a contented sigh. "You should know that you will be loved always, Willow Graham. You will be treasured. You will never again be alone."

_Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin  
Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in  
Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove  
Dance me to the end of love  
Oh, let me see your beauty when the witnesses are gone_
Let me feel you moving like they do in Babylon
Show me slowly what I only know the limits of
Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the wedding now, dance me on and on
Dance me very tenderly and dance me very long
We're both of us beneath our love, we're both of us above
Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to the children who are asking to be born
Dance me to the curtains that our kisses have outworn
Raise a tent of shelter now, though every thread is torn
Dance me to the end of love

Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin
Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in
Touch me with your naked hand or touch me with your glove
Dance me to the end of love

(Leonard Cohen, 'Dance Me To The End Of Love')

"But that came from just hearing that in the death camps, beside the crematoria, a string quartet was pressed into performance while this horror was going on, a performance by those whose fate was this horror also. And they would be playing classical music while their fellow prisoners were being killed, burnt. So that music, 'Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin,' [speaks of] the beauty of there being the consummation of life, the end of this existence and of the passionate element in that consummation. But it is the same language that we use for surrender to the beloved."

(Leonard Cohen speaking about the holocaust inspiring 'Dance Me To The End Of Love')

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REFERENCES

(1) Songs for this chapter: Edvard Grieg’s Pièces Lyriques, Op. 47 No. 3: Mélodie (performed by Shani Diluka); for the dress and the beginning of the opera scene, Ludovico Einaudi’s The Crane Dance; for the talking scenes at the opera, Someday My Prince Will Come performed by Light Jazz Academy; and finally, one of my most quintessential Hannigram songs for the proposal scene, Leonard Cohen’s Dance Me To The End Of Love performed by The Civil Wars.

(2) Will’s opera dress with and without the cloak (the colors are based on the gown without the cloak):
(3) Here is what a crown roast of pork looks like.

(4) I made a Spotify playlist for you guys to enjoy the tracks more easily. I’ll still keep the Youtube playlist up for those who cannot access Spotify.

(5) The engagement ring:
Cryptomeria

Chapter Summary

ENCEPHALITIS.
(As it should have been portrayed. Because inaccurate show was inaccurate.)

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: Horror themes in this chapter and a fair bit of hallucinations.
But why do I even bother, you're the Hannibal fandom! You can handle this shit!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“But the dark pines of your mind dip deeper
And you are sinking, sinking, sleeper
In an elementary world;
There is something down there and you want it told.”
( Gwendolyn MacEwen, "Dark Pines Under Water" )

“I put my heart and soul into my work, and I have lost my mind in the process.”
( Van Gogh )

Blood on her hands. It'll crust underneath her fingernails if she doesn't wash it off soon. Blood all over the floor, arcing across the room, up the side of the wall. Beth doesn't seem to be too bothered; her corpse looks up at Will with a wide, ghastly smile. She's smiling in her death. Must have been a good death. Will helped her.
Will helped her?
She must have. She has blood on her hands, after all. Her hands are shaking now. She needs to—she needs to go—she needs to tell them—tell them what? What was she going to tell them?

Turning around, Will steps out.

Shouts. Shock. They hover.

What was she going to tell them?
Downstairs, after washing up and the subsequent panic attack, Jack finds her. Will is sitting on Beth LeBeau's back porch, looking over her barren backyard which continues into the nearby woods. All of the trees are empty, just bare brown sticks bristling into the pale winter sky.

Jack sits down next to her. "What was that in there?"

Will shrugs. "I don't know."

Jack tries again. "I've seen you confused and I've seen you upset, but I've never seen you afraid like this."

Afraid. Is that it? It doesn't seem like fear, though. Not until she woke up after. What is there to be afraid of? Above her, the sky sheds black feathers fluttering down to rest on her lap.

"Well, I'm an old hand at fear, Jack. I think I can manage this one." Did that sound good? Will swallows her uncertainty when Jack gives her a look. "I just got distracted. I can go back in."

Despite his obvious misgivings, perhaps because of the alarming state of the victim, Jack chooses for now to believe her. "Now what was it in there that's got you mute all of a sudden?" When Will doesn't immediately answer, he continues, "Will, you contaminated the crime scene. You've never done that before."

"I thought I was responsible for it."

"What?"

"I thought I was the killer. Sometimes, with what I do, it's easy to lose myself. That's what happened," Will says out loud and more to herself than to anyone else. "I lost myself in the killer."

Jack remains quiet for a moment, perhaps waiting for anything else that might be forthcoming from her. When Will says nothing more, Jack tells her, "What you do is take all the evidence at a crime scene and extrapolate. You reconstruct the thinking of a killer. You don't think of yourself as the killer."

"Thinking, being," Will shrugs, "semantics." She laughs, though hoarse and humorless; that sounds like something Hannibal would say. "I got lost in the reconstruction, that's all."

Jack heaves a great big sigh. "Will, I know you don't like to be the cause for concern, but I am officially concerned about you."

"Officially?" she barely only manages not to snort.

"Yes. You've not been yourself, Will. I really think that you need to start seeing Alana again."

And tell Alana that she contaminated a crime scene by playing with the blood the way toddlers play with mud? Will would be committed in an institution in a heartbeat. Maybe that's what needs to happen, but Will doesn't want it, she's not crazy, she's not crazy.

"Alana and I agree that we are better off not seeing each other in that capacity anymore, Jack. I'll find a psychiatrist by the weekend, if it'll make you feel better."
"Do that," Jack grunts, levering back up to his feet. "We need you here, but not to break you."

"Of course not, Jack. Of course not."

Jack leaves after a while. Will has about ten more minutes before they need to reconvene. There is a murder to solve: a victim to vindicate and a killer to find. Far be it for the world to stop for Will Graham's crisis of sanity.

She wishes Hannibal were here with her. He would know what to do. Back inside, everyone tries not to give her obvious looks. They fail, of course. Will's vision is too clear, too sharp right now, to fool. Ignoring Beverly's concerned look, Will walks back into Beth LeBeau's bedroom to work.

"She drowned in her own blood," Will tells them, "and what she didn't drown in is all over the floor, under the bed. He dragged her there. He was waiting for her. The monster under the bed. She fought to claw her way out. She died in fear." Will walks around to the bedside, then to the window to look outside. "He knew her. Someone close. Cared about her, or thought he did."

"Soooo, we're looking for boyfriends, ex-boyfriends, coworkers, and the guy who bags her groceries. Can we get any more specific?" Zeller snarks. Price kicks him.

"There's dermal tissue under her fingernails," Ariadne points out, "presumably from the killer's when she tried to fight back. But the skin is so... diseased or, or, damaged that it didn't leave anything for us to work with."

"Not even prints!" Price agrees. "Beth scratched the killer hard enough to pile tissue under her nails but never drew blood."

"Why didn't he bleed?" Jack asks. No one has an answer.

After a moment, Zeller picks up, "After he cut up her face, it looks like he was trying to pull her skin back."

"Like removing a mask," Price hums, tilting his head to peer at the pictures over Zeller's shoulder. "How strange. What kind of monster does that?"

Except Will doesn't think it's strange at all. Unmasking is a part of growing closer together. Uncovering the truth. All humans, to some degree, wish to unmask those closest to them to reveal the underneath. Inherent curiosity, a compulsion to unearth secrets. To know the unknowable, the things hidden behind.

"Not a monster at all," Will says. "The sentiment is entirely human."

They leave the team to process the scene, Price helming the operation now that Beverly is with Will. Inside the car, it is quiet and warm; Will lets her head loll against the headrest. She can still hear Beth's screams, Beth's gurgling breaths as she died. She can still smell the coppery tang of blood on her hands.

"Will," Beverly asks, eyes conveying the depth of her concern. She's been quiet since Will surfaced from that room covered in blood.

"I don't know, Bev. I don't feel so good."
A hand lands on her forehead. She didn't even realize that she had closed her eyes. "You're warm. I think you're still sick."

"You should take a nap in the office back at Quantico," Ariadne suggests from the back seat. "Naps are helpful when sick."

Beverly starts the car and throws a blanket over Will's front. "Get snug, lovebug. It's a bit of a drive anyway."

"I'll be fine, Bev," Will says because the furrow between Bev's forehead hasn't gone away. "Just a little under the weather, that's all."

"Girl, let me worry if you won't. It's the least I can do."

"You do a lot," Will reassures her. "Thank you."

No more talk after that. The car plods along through the slush left over the streets, passing by a world so far removed from Will that it feels surreal sitting and watching it. Eventually her eyes close again. As she falls asleep, she dreams of Hannibal's dinner table and the bounty sitting upon it, their plump skins darkening over time with rot.

In her dream, she relives heat. Hannibal undresses her with care and characteristic hunger. The dress parts to reveal her body, heavy silken folds giving way to his insistent hands. They are alone together here, cocooned in their own silent world, where they are free to indulge in each other to the very fullest of their hearts' desire.

"Tesoro," he murmurs, "cara mia."

Will tugs his tie free from his neck. "Why am I naked and you're still dressed?"

Hannibal grins, predatory and dark.

Naked and hungry, he comes over her, tie in hand until they are level. With gentleness, he brings her wrists up above her head, crossing them and looping the tie around such that there is no escaping him, nowhere to go and no way to move. Afterwards, he straddles her thighs and looks upon her with glittering eyes. "Do you trust me?" he says.

There is only one answer.

Will closes her eyes in surrender.

"Will," Beverly shakes her, "we're here."
But where is here? Will wants to ask. She retains enough control over herself to not verbalize her question. Instead, she allows herself to be led along down darkened hallways, taking the time to gather herself. The pieces of herself. Can one assemble a puzzle if the pieces aren't all together?

At some point, she sits down. At another point, Beverly tries to tell her something. All sound is muted and distinct, like the rest of reality, but that's okay. That's alright. Beverly didn't seem to need a response. She's gone away.

Ariadne says something about tea and also steps out. Will is finally left alone in the small room, which she slowly comes to recognize as her office. Quantico. That's where here is.

Out of reflex—perhaps one of those protective reflexes her brain still has intact—she fumbles for her phone to call Hannibal. She doesn't stop to consider that he might perhaps be busy at this time.

Hannibal answers on the second ring. "Hello, darling, good morning."

Will's throat chokes up. She doubles over and tries to stop the tears that suddenly want to come. Hannibal, she wants Hannibal, the one safe and solid thing left in her world. Her anchor, her ship, her safe harbor, all in one.

"Will? Is everything alright?"

"No," she croaks, clutching hard at her arm. "Bad case. Lost grip."

"Lost grip of what, dear?" he asks, concerned but calm. His background is quiet; perhaps he's sitting in his office.

"Myself. In there. At the scene, it was..." she swallows. "I can still smell the blood on my hands. Hannibal, I—I can't remember the crime scene before I saw myself killing her."

"Those memories sank out of sight, yet you're aware of their absence." He hums, considering. He sounds so grounded and unbothered. Does he understand the depth of her disturbance? Does he not care?

"There's a... a grandiosity," she tells him, "to the violence that I imagined that feels more real than what I know is true." She grows calmer with each word, leeching off his grounding presence.

"What do you know to be true?" he asks softly, as if he were there with her. Uncondescending. Total acceptance.

"I know I didn't kill her," Will declares, "I couldn't have." After all, she drove to Quantico this morning from Hannibal's house. "But I remember cutting into her. I can still feel the give of her flesh, I—I remember watching her die."

Hannibal hums again and is quiet for a moment. "You must overcome these... delusions, these reflections disguising your reality, my dear."

"I know," Will releases a shuddering breath. He understands.

"What sort of savage reflection is this killer casting over your perception this time?"

"It wasn't savage, it was—it was lonely. Desperate and sad. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and I looked right through me, past me, as if I wasn't myself. As if I was just a—a stranger."

There is radio silence and for a moment Will almost thinks that Hannibal has left the line. But then: "You have to honestly confront your limitations with what you do, Will. I feel as though you're
crossing a threshold. I fear for you."

"Yeah," Will snorts, though her attempt at humor falls flat. "I fear for me too."

Ariadne then returns bearing two cups of tea. "Oh! Er, I can step out?"

Will shakes her head, straightening. "Hannibal, I have to go."

"Please take care of yourself. I am here for you if you need me," he says, "you know that."

"I know."

"You must come to me if you feel unsafe by yourself," Hannibal insists. "You are always welcome to my home."

"I know," Will smiles despite herself. "I'll call you later."

"If you forget, I shall call instead. Have care, my love."

"Yes. Bye." Will feels immediately bereft after hanging up.

Ariadne quietly apologizes, offering her tea. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cut your conversation short."

"It's alright," Will answers her. The tea is aromatic and strong; she takes a hot mouthful. "I just needed a touch of calm. He's always calm, Hannibal. Nothing seems to faze him."

"A good temperament for a physician," Ariadne remarks. "Did he help you feel better?"

"Oh yes. Much better." Hannibal's just that good.

There are no more words after that. Ariadne seems to understand her need for space, for time to process all that has happened. They sit in companionable silence, Ariadne sorting through new data on her computer and Will just—sitting there, because she's entitled to it after such an ordeal.

More than anything, they need to catch this killer. Will shudders to think of another such scene. And there is something about this one, something that catches and snags at her the more she thinks about it. There is something very wrong with this killer.

"I'll be right back," Will says. "Restroom."

Ariadne makes a faint sound of assent.

Outside the office, the hallway is brightly lit. It makes her head pound. Blinking, she walks towards the nearest restrooms, heedless of other people around her until she hears Alana's voice breaking sharply around the corner.

"You knew from the moment you pulled her from her classroom that you were putting her in a potentially destructive environment, Jack!"

Just great. Alana and Jack, talking about her.

"I had eight college girls dead in Minnesota, Alana, and Will caught the killer for me in days." Jack sounds vaguely displeased; about right, because Will feels vaguely displeased too.

"Will," Alana indignantly retorts, "also caught that killer's disease. She can't stop thinking about these evil minds of yours, Jack, she can't stop thinking about what it is to take a life!"
Is that how Alana sees it? Is Alana just another one of those who think of Will as someone who could be 'one of them'? Will leans her shoulder against the wall and closes her eyes. Around the corner, Jack gathers his words with care.

"I'd rather her go a little mad than other innocents lose their lives. And I think she feels the same way."

"Will is also an innocent."

Jack releases a momentous sigh. "Yes," he says after a pause, "yes, she is. And genuine, too. But she's also determined to do this. She's the best. And she'll survive anything I could put her through. She'll always fight her way back to herself."

"No, she won't," Alana retorts, "because mark my words, Jack, one day will come when she will be so subsumed by the reflections of the killers you make her chase that she won't even know the difference between them and herself. It's not what you put her through that I worry about; it's what these killers put her through."

"You think she's mentally ill?"

"No!" Alana exclaims, exasperated. "It's not an illness, what she has! It's a gift! Look. I think Will has more mirror neurons than most people. We all have them, we're filled with them as children, it helps us mimic and learn. Over time, we're supposed to lose them as we grow up, but Will didn't. Will held on to all of hers. It's rare, what she has, perhaps even unprecedented; absolute empathy. When you take her to these crime scenes, she doesn't just look at the killer—she becomes the killer. That is why she's so good! To her, the very air has screams smeared all over it. In those places, she doesn't just reflect, she also absorbs. Have you stopped to consider what that does to her at all?"

Perhaps Will's estimation of Alana has been clouded by her recent jealousy. Will sighs, admiration rising once again. All the same, it saddens her, because for all that Alana understands her condition, Alana fails to grasp what it means to Will. They are both correct, but Jack more than her; Will wants to help despite the danger. Will wants to use her condition for something good. If only using it doesn't leave her so paralyzed and afraid that she might become one of them.

The killers. What's so terrible about them again? Apart from how they take people's lives, of course. But don't we all do that? Don't we all murder in our various wicked little ways? Most do so quietly but some in style, as a statement for a captive audience. We murder our children through our mishandlings of their young lives; we slaughter our friendships through lies told over time. We even murder across countries and over oceans every time we buy a pair of jeans produced in some sweatshop in a third world country!

What difference does it make if Will becomes one of them? It's not as though she hasn't already killed a man. She knows how it feels to take a life, what its weight does to the soul. She has handled that. Killing for one reason is no different from killing for another, except perhaps if Will felt like playing judge to each reason's worth.

She goes home early that day and not a soul questions it. But they don't need to know that she pulls out of the freeway and heads towards Delaware to revisit Beth LeBeau’s house. She wants to go
back to see, without anyone else there, what it was that shook her so. There is something in the picture that she is missing, something vital and perhaps obvious if she were more collected and put together.

In front of the house is a single police car parked by the curb. Its headlights illuminate the yellow cordon stretching around the property. Will approaches the officer with her badge out, asks after the periphery and whether anyone's been inside.

"No, ma'am," the officer says, "quiet as a tomb 'round here after the last of your crew left earlier. No one really wants to be here, y'know. After that scene in there."

Will cocks a mild smirk. "Lost a bet, did you? Hope you at least got good coffee while you sit out here."

The officer laughs, self-deprecating. "Yeah, my partner hates me right now, but I choose to see it as a nice break from reality."

"A nice break from reality," Will echoes. "I need me one of those." She always only gets the not-so-nice ones. "I'll just be inside for another quick walk-through, if you don't mind. Trying to jog my brain and see what else I'm missing."

"Sure," the officer gestures wide. "Knock yourself out."

Up the porch and past the door she goes, tread quiet on the carpet. The home is well-kept and clean, warm despite Beth having lived here alone. There must be a cat, Will notes, as she passes the food bowl in the kitchen. Poor thing. They must have scared it earlier. Will hopes it's indoors or at least found somewhere warm outside to rest.

Upstairs, the blood looks blue-black under moonlight, smeared on the floor into shapes by her hands. Nothing to see here except the state of her own madness, it seems.

After a while, she turns and leaves, back down the stairs, which are only partially lit from the hallway light and affords her a clear view out the window, to the woods behind the house.

There is someone standing outside.

Will is momentarily stunned. The pale figure is standing there in the snow, unmistakable but near inhuman, with a soiled white dress and long dark hair, meeting Will's gaze—and then it bolts.

"Wait!" Will yells, clattering down and almost falling as she bursts through the back door.

Snow crunches under her boots. Her breath mists before her face. The moon is bright above but soon obscures as she runs headlong past the first row of dead trees.

"I know you're there!" Will calls out, though to whom she doesn't know. It is so cold that her teeth are beginning to chatter. "My name is Will Graham. We're in Greenwood, Delaware." Eyes unaccustomed to the shadows shifting in the grey dark, Will reaches out a hand instead. "If you can hear me—you're alive!"

Her hand lands on something cold and clammy, but recognizably human. Or at least she can tell it's a human limb. She holds on and the woman—it's a woman!—cries out, panicked, ripping away from her grasp. Will is shoved and stumbles back, landing on her rump, winded and a little dizzy. "Wait! Wait, don't go!"

But the woman is already gone and Will alone, shivering in the snow. There is something vaguely
rubbery and soft resting in her hand. Somewhere in the distance, the sounds of flight.

"But are you okay, though?" Beverly asks over the phone, and not for the first time. "Seriously?"

"I don't know, I," Will exhales, "I'm driving home now."

"Why did you call me? Why not Jack?"

"Because I'm not—I'm not entirely sure what I saw was real. There was—I grabbed her arm, Bev, and—"

"And?"

"—and an entire layer of dead skin separated from—from the underlying tissue! Slipped off her arm like a glove!" What did Will do with that piece of skin? Where is it? Did she leave it behind? For fuck's sake, Will Graham, why can't you get a grip?

Beverly murmurs on the other side, unintelligible at first and then louder. "That would explain why the killer didn't bleed, Will. There's no circulation. Dead flesh. Will, if we're correct, this killer is seriously ill."

"I know." Join the club.

"If there's nothing alive in the tissue to bind it to the subcutaneous layer underneath, then it'll peel off like a plastic glove if you pull hard enough. And it won't bleed even if you scratch really hard."

"What kind of disease would do that?" Will asks. Hannibal might know.

"I don't know, could be some sort of staphylococcal infection. That, or leprosy."

"And her eyes," Will continues, remembering in a sudden flash, "they were discolored. She was malnourished, severely jaundiced. Had to be."

"Liver's shutting down?"

"And the look in those eyes. They were deranged. She... she mutilated Beth LeBeau's face because she thought it was someone else underneath wearing a mask."

There is silence from the other side, perhaps Beverly giving her space to flesh out her thoughts. Or perhaps Will just sounds so far gone that Beverly doesn't know what to say anymore.

But Will is seeing clearer through the killer's eyes, so she continues: "She's unable to recognize faces, Beverly. That's why—that's why I felt like a stranger—she's face-blind. If she did kill Beth LeBeau, she may not even know it."

"Then why come back to the scene? That's classic unsub behavior."

"To convince herself that she didn't." Will guides her car around a careful bend and follows the tracks of the SUV ahead of her.
"Is that why you went back?"

Will grunts, annoyed. "Look, if I wasn't clear on the issue, I know I didn't kill Beth LeBeau. I just want to know who did."

"Yeah, girl, me too. But you should know that you're the subject of a lot of speculation at the bureau right now."

That deserves a laugh. "Oh yeah? What are they speculating now?"

"That Jack pushed you to the breaking point and this broke you at last."

What was it that Hannibal had called her? A fragile little teacup. Easy to shatter but so hard to put back together. How to respond to Beverly? Shall she be honest? How honest is too honest?

"This killer," Will carefully parses, "can't accept her reality. I occasionally identify with that, but."

"But?"

"That being said, I feel relatively sane compared to her." Sanity is a relative concept, after all.

She enters Wolf Trap with a soft right turn. The long and winding farm lanes are lonely this late at night. Will finds herself absurdly thankful for Beverly's presence, nevermind the doubts and the misgivings. Will would have misgivings too, if their positions were switched. And if it wasn't for Beverly keeping her company on the drive home, she might not have made it alive.

"I'm almost home," Will says. "Thanks for talking, Bev. I really appreciate it."

"Anytime, girlfriend. And I mean that. Call me if you need, alright? I'll see you tomorrow, bright and early. We'll find our killer, don't worry."

Will hangs up with warm reassurances. Her house looms ahead, darkened but for the sole light she leaves on the porch. If she squints, she can almost see Georgie's ears and nose through the front window; the dogs must have heard her approach.

What a long day it's been. Will wants to rest.

Indoors, she warms up, cuddling the dogs even as she stokes the fire in the grate. The ancient heating clanks and groans around her, the sounds of an old house settling. She should eat something. A shower is also a good idea.

The light in her bathroom flickers while she stands under the spray. It's warm in here, with the water cascading over her head, heady and almost like blood. There it runs in rich red rivulets, down Will's face and neck and chest, past her nipples and between her breasts, along the contours of her stomach, between her legs, around her ankles and down the drain. If she opens her mouth, she can taste the iron-copper tang of it; she flicks out her tongue and swallows, savoring.

When she brushes her teeth, the spit from her mouth is black. She wipes her face and leaves the towel saturated red with blood on the floor. It's cold despite her heater at full blast. Winston follows her downstairs as she goes to turn off all the lights. The dogs are comfortable, their bowls all filled. Did she do that? Hm. She puts out an extra bowl of water out for them anyway.

When she gets back upstairs, there is someone else in her room.

She knows more by instinct rather than sight. She doesn't see anyone but she can feel them, an alien
presence, an intruder, something **other** disrupting the atmosphere of peace. The bed is untouched and the lamp still aglow. The curtains are halfway parted; the windows are closed.

Is she hallucinating it? Could it just be a false fear? Paranoia would not be far-contrived at this point; in fact, it's practically overdue.

But no. No. Someone else is here. Will remains rooted at the door, eyes sweeping to and fro, wondering where it is that they hide. Where are they hiding? Where is there a place to hide?

And then Winston comes up beside her and starts growling at the bed.

The bed. Whoever it is, they are under her bed. Will would have slept right there on that bed. They could have killed her in her sleep, drag her under and rip her face off like they did Beth LeBeau! But not before Will rips their face off first. She wants to find out what's underneath.

Suddenly, Will realizes she isn't safe. She isn't safe here. She isn't safe by herself. She isn't sure that she can even be safe anywhere else—except maybe—

**Hannibal.**

She turns and runs.

Her bag, which she never unpacked. The dogs, all seven of them. Her breath in the harsh, cold air. The lamp is still on upstairs. There is a gun in her glovebox. Car running low on gas. Shadows flashing past her as she speeds away. Tires screaming protest. Her pulse as fast as the number on the dashboard.

Run, Willow. Run faster.

"It is 3:24 am. Your name is Willow Graham. You are in Baltimore, Maryland. You came to me."

Hannibal's voice wrenches her from her stupor—stupor?—Will blinks up at him, inhale exhale. She is seated on his couch in the study, Hannibal right beside her. The dogs are nearby, Winston attentive and concerned at her feet.

**Fuck.**

"How did—I—when did—I'm—"

"Come now. Repeat after me, darling. It is 3:25 am..."
Will repeats, stuttering and heaving panicked breaths, but slowly calming down. Hannibal's hand on the nape of her neck feels good, really good. Warm and heavy, like a secure blanket. She's safe here with him. She's safe.

"There," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to her temple. "Much better. Are you returned to me, Will?"

"Yes," Will whispers, closing her eyes tight. No hiding it now. She lost time in front of him. She lost time, again.

Hannibal says nothing but holds her, tucking their bodies close for a time. It's exactly what she needs. The fire crackles in the hearth, a seemingly ever-present source of warmth in this house, and again, for a moment, she can conjure her favorite illusion, the cocoon within which they are wrapped and protected within these walls. If she clutches hard at Hannibal, it is only because she's afraid.

After some time, Will recovers her speech. She turns her face into Hannibal's neck and murmurs her gratitude. "I know you're tired," she sighs. "I'm sorry I'm so much trouble."

"Hush now. All I care about is your well-being," Hannibal assures her. "Do you feel better?"

"I feel..." Will halts. Should she be honest? She should. How honest? But Hannibal deserves the truth. No matter how it might make Will look. "I feel like I'm fading."

Hannibal is quiet only for a moment. "Have you experienced any further loss of time like this? Or perhaps hallucinations?"

Will's silence is answer enough.

From the table, he takes a notepad and a pen. Extricating himself from her, Hannibal hands over the paper, tone still calm and measured. "I'd like you to draw a clock face, Will. Numbered. Small hand indicating the hour, large hand the minute."

Will takes the notepad. "Why?"

"An exercise," Hannibal tilts his head. "Go ahead. Indulge me. I want you to focus on this present moment, the now. As often as you can, think of where you are, and when. Think of who you are. Focus on that."

Swallowing, Will takes pen to paper and draws a rough circle. No artifice in it, just plain lines. Numbers, one to twelve. Hands. Amazing how such a simple construct delineates time. When she is finished, Hannibal takes the pad and peers at it with inscrutable eyes, and then looks up at her without pity, only his usual brand of love and genuine concern.

"3:36 am. Baltimore, Maryland. Your name is Will Graham," he recites. "Whenever you feel lost, I want you to repeat this to yourself. A simple reminder, a handle to reality for you to hold on to and know you are alive. You are not fading away."

"How are you so sure?" Will asks, uncertain and faint.

"I refuse to let you," he responds in kind. "If you can no longer find it in yourself to trust your senses, then put your trust in me. I am your anchor, remember?"

At that, Will has to smile. She leans forward, bumping their foreheads together, and confesses, "You are also my safe harbour."

"Good," Hannibal says. "That is how it should be."
After that, Hannibal asks her no more questions. Expertly sensing her need for nothing else but reassurance, he takes her upstairs and unwraps her from clothes, tucks her under the duvet and covers her body with his own. Will falls asleep like that, Hannibal humming familiar notes into her ear.

In the morning, they both wake to grey skies and paws skittering on the floor. Will gets up at once and stumbles to let the dogs outside. No need for them to make a mess in Hannibal's house. She's already been enough of an imposition.

Over breakfast, which they share while standing at the kitchen counter, Will tells him of the case, more to rehash it for herself than anything else. She tells him all of it, even her tampering and contamination of the crime scene, her hallucinations, her lost time. All throughout, he listens attentively and without judgement; Will loves him even more.

They are disrupted by a phone's insistent ringing. It's Will's, of course, what with an active case ongoing.

"Will, we've got a lead," Beverly tells her, words crisp and obviously caffeinated. "We matched the tissue samples from the crime scene to a girl's medical records, and we've got her mother en route to Quantico now. Jack wants you here."

"Kay," she sighs. "I'll be there in an hour."

"You okay, though? To come in?" Beverly asks.

"I am, thanks, Bev. See you in a bit."

Will hangs up and meets Hannibal's disapproving eye. "You are not well enough to work," he sighs. "You should stay and rest. There is no need to incur further damage to your body or your psyche."

"Fat chance of that," Will snorts. "Jack wants the killer caught." And then, after a moment, "I want the killer caught."

Hannibal sighs again. Will feels terrible for disturbing his rest and crashing his house and then leaving like this even though she should stay. Come on, say something, she thinks, but he doesn't. How did Beverly put it? Too much of a gentleman to tell her how to live her life.

But maybe that's what I need, Will muses, someone to tell me what to do with myself so I don't do this and end up crazy.

"Have you considered Cotard's syndrome?" he suddenly asks.

Will turns around. "What?"

"It's a rare delusional disorder in which a person believes he or she is dead."

"Are you talking about the killer or me?" she asks, remembering last night well enough.

But Hannibal is too good to take her bait. "The killer, of course. Perhaps she was attempting to
uncover the victim's face because she was unable to identify them. Such a delusion is associated with Cotard's. A misfiring in the areas of the brain which are responsible for face recognition, combined with disruptions in the amygdala which adds emotions to those recognitions. Without these proper functions, even those closest to her would seem like impostors."

Understanding dawns on Will. "So she... she reached out to someone she loved and trusted. And then when she couldn't recognize them, she felt betrayed, became violent. She can't trust anything or anyone she once knew to be trustworthy. Her mental illness won't let her rest."

"Precisely," Hannibal nods.

"I have to go. They need to hear this. We need to get her help."

But, unable to simply walk out the way a rude guest would do, Will pulls Hannibal into a tight hug, pressing her face into his chest.

"Thank you. I love you. I hope you understand."

Hannibal only sighs again, large hand smoothing over her curls down the back of her head.

At Quantico, Jack and Beverly await her with their lead. "She's in the interrogation room, whenever you're ready," Jack says.

"Can I ask the questions?" Beverly pipes in. Will smiles at her; it's an offer to take on all the hard work by herself. Beverly is trying to give her a light day.

"Knock yourself out. Let's get it over with."

Mrs. Madchen sits inside the interrogation room looking distinctly uncomfortable, but not for the same reason everyone else usually does. She is simply an uncomfortable type of person, and with one glance at her Will can tell that something is wrong.

"I was almost relieved when I got that phone call," Mrs. Madchen tells them. "I thought that you had found her and that she was, um... that she would be at peace."

Beverly shoots Will a look. "You... thought she might be dead."

Mrs. Madchen giggles, low and awkward. "Well, doesn't that make me sound like a horrible mother. I tried to be good mom, you know. I tried to do everything I could. I just don't want her to be in pain anymore."

Indicative of strong skill, Beverly keeps going. "No one is doubting your dedication to your daughter, Mrs. Madchen. We're all just trying to understand this. How well did she know Beth LeBeau?"

"Oh," Mrs. Madchen shrugs, "they were best friends. They went to school together, um, until it was unsafe for Georgia to go to school."

"And when did you first recognize that your daughter was struggling with mental illness?"

"She was nine," Mrs. Madchen sighs. "Nine years old and she told me that she was thinking about killing me all the time. She said that she was already dead."
"What sort of other symptoms did she have?"

"Seizures, hallucinations, psychotic depressions... you name it," Mrs. Madchen laughs, still awkward. "I was grateful when she was medicated catatonic."

"Was she ever violent?" Will asks.

"Sometimes."

"What did her doctors say?" Beverly asks.

"Not much. She spent months at a time in the hospital. Blood tests and brain scans, a never-ending parade, and all of them inconclusive. They could never tell me what was wrong. Maybe she was just--born wrong, you know? I started thinking that after a while."

And herein the failure of the system, part of what scares Will about her own problems. If she were to get treated and institutionalized like Alana wants, who is there to guarantee that they will treat her right? Will they even know what they are doing, what they are treating?

"They were just always guessing," Mrs. Madchen continues, dismayed. "I did my own research too. I wrote down every word they said. All the medical terminologies. I learned a lot. But mostly what I learned is how little we actually know about mental illness. All they know, it's rarely about finding solutions. It's just more about managing expectations."

Mrs. Madchen cannot tell them any more than that. It helps Will paint a better picture; now they have a name. Georgia Madchen. Poor girl. She must be distraught out there, unable to comprehend what all has happened, how she has ripped her own world apart. What a struggle it must have been throughout her life for even her own mother to give up on her.

Even Will can say she is more fortunate than that. Her own father never gave up on her, despite what little he could do.

"How are we going to catch this girl, though?" Beverly sighs. "There is no way we can predict where she goes next."

Will wonders if she should tell them about last night. Perhaps not? She never saw anyone at her house, as convinced as she was of a presence there other than herself. What will she sound like if she tells them that Georgia Madchen is hiding under her bed?

"I need some breakfast in me for all this high-octane brain work," Beverly declares. "I'm gonna go get an omelet. You want some?"

"Already ate, but thanks," Will smiles. "I'll be at my office. Ariadne should be here soon. Maybe I'll have some of her tea."

Beverly shrugs. "Suit yourself, more for me!" They separate at the stairwell where Will overheard Alana and Jack yesterday. Was it just yesterday? Already it seems like a lifetime ago.

As she walks to her office, the walls begin melting. Melting? They can't be melting. Her feet are still steady on the stable ground. Keep walking, Will Graham. Almost there.

Her office is dark but the world suddenly tilts. Her hip catches on the side of the table. She trips on something and falls. Her body hits the floor with a thud. She can't breathe. Breathe.

"Will, are you okay? Will!"
The world turns black.

Chapter End Notes

In this fic, there are only realistic portrayals of true to life encephalitis, as well as an actual feasible medical explanation behind all of Will's symptoms. If you're medical in any way, you may have already picked up the clues. If you're not, tough luck, gotta wait until next chapter when Dr. Lecter himself can explain it to you.

HANNIBAL CHAPTER COMING UP!

Questions? Comments? Incoherent screams of rage you want to share? Come say hi!
Chapter Summary

In which there is hospital intrigue, collegial politics, a miscarriage, an unfortunate conversation in Will's hospital room, and Hannibal gets punched in the gut by his own machinations.

Chapter Notes

Another Hannibal chapter, yay! Arc Two officially commences with this chapter! Remember that there is a [Pinterest page](http://www.pinterest.com) for this fic! Also, the [Spotify playlist](https://open.spotify.com) have both been updated with new content! I lurk around [my Tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com), come say hi sometime!

There was a question last chapter about how there are two authors on this fic and how it works between us when we write. Truth be told, I (iluxia) do the writing and my twinness (aventria) does the editing/proofing/fine-tuning. I credit her as a creator, however, because she is responsible for half the plot. We have been working together on fics for more than a decade now (god, we're old) so we have it down to an art form. I think I said it before, but both of us are in post-grad, her in criminal psych and myself in neurosurgery residency. We found each other back in the heyday of Fanfiction.net, circa 2005; we were starting undergrad then. And then we were on LJ when LJ was a thing! But no, we don't live near each other; in fact, there is an entire continent between us. It's okay, though! It's the 21st century! We have interwebs!

And finally:

**HAPPY HOLIDAYS, FANDOM!
STAY WITH US IN 2016, MORE!**

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**kikashi**

-a forcing move, usually made outside the primary flow of play
-yields high efficiency in game by forcing the opponent to abandon a course of action
-a *kikashi* stone will typically be sacrificed while conferring an advantage
-the answering move dictates the capacity of a *kikashi* stone; moves can be *kikashi* or not depending on whether they are answered with appropriate sophistication
"Dr. Lecter, excuse me!"

Hannibal turns to find Robbie, the ER's charge nurse, sprinting up to him with a most distraught expression on her face. This cannot bode well. "What is it?" he asks, washing dried blood from his forearms.

"I know you just finished up in there, but we have a situation I thought you ought to know about before it goes any further." She holds up a piece of paper, a run sheet from the paramedics with a patient's details. "New patient in 17, just rolled in from Washington. Quantico, I was told. ER to ER transfer. Requested to specifically come here to see you."

He reads the name at the top of the paper — GRAHAM, WILLOW 33y / F — and starts walking.

"Witnessed seizure, airway remained intact..." Robbie continues talking at his side, a quick report that he picks up and files aside for the more immediate task of examining the sudden torrential concern churning in his stomach. It is an unusual reaction on his part. It has been a long time since anyone has been the object of this much concern.

They have just finished the emergent intubation of a trauma patient in another bay; his scrubs are bloody and in need of a change. Peripherally he is aware of Yuriko sprinting down the hall from where that patient is being carted away towards the OR suites. There are three more unstable patients warranting his attention at this time, but he finds he has already shoved all of this aside. He can only think of Will.

She left this morning despite feeling unwell. Hannibal had watched her walk away and felt an unfamiliar sense of dread creep up behind him, a phantom sensation he had no idea how to quantify. He has known of the fever for a while, of course, likely some infectious process affecting her overall status of health, but he has allowed it to continue for his own selfish purposes and to see how it would come to a head. It was too much of an opportunity to waste, this chance to watch her exceptional abilities unravel under a sweet and fevered duress. It also whittled down her defenses to let him in, much faster than he otherwise would have been able were she hale and whole.

At this junction, there are yet ways for him to amend the situation to fit his design. Should he like for her to continue untreated, he could call in favors from certain people within the system, or better yet alter results and interfere with processes himself, but—

"Dr. Lecter?" Robbie asks, stopping him with a hand on his forearm. "It's alright, she's stable in there."

A momentary lapse in attention. This won't do. Hannibal affects a troubled expression. "I suppose it is different when the patient is someone you hold dear."

"Of course, it is," she sighs, comfortingly patting his arm. "We aren't gods; we're only human. Just remember that."

They step into the bay and Hannibal's eyes immediately lock onto Will. She is pale, mildly diaphoretic, her creased forehead speaking of some level of pain. Lisa, one of his ER nurses, is crouched by the stretcher with a 20-gauge in hand, retrieving blood and inserting a fresh IV. The monitor overhead reads stable numbers with mild tachycardia. There is already a bag of saline dripping into an existing access and the cooling blanket hums along, tucked underneath her sheet. Altogether she looks better than she must be, if whatever this is has caused a seizure.
"I insisted that she was brought here," a familiar voice quietly says from his left. Ariadne is there, holding Will's messenger bag and coat. Jack Crawford is with her, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "I thought she'd want to be here closer to you. I hope that wasn't too much of a presumption."

"You presume correctly, Miss Black. I would much rather her stay where I can vouch for the care she will receive. Am I to assume you witnessed her seizure?" 

"Yes, sir," she nods, spine straightening and voice gaining strength as they enter into more familiar territory. "It appeared to be a generalized tonic-clonic, 96 seconds, no loss of bladder control, no evident airway compromise or emesis. She was post-ictal afterwards for approximately ninety minutes and woke disoriented but otherwise neurologically intact. As the emergency physician at the nearest ER was incapable of performing a thorough neuro exam, I took the liberty of assessing Will myself and found no outstanding deficits, reflexes included. Of course, she did not recall the episode." (1)

"Of course," Hannibal nods. If Ariadne had continued with medical school as Yuriko had told him about, she would have made a beautiful addition to his collection of bright young minds alongside her friend. "Did Will complain of any neurological symptoms prior to the seizure, or seem to behave unusually at all this morning?"

"She did have a headache, but I'm uncertain we could call it an aura since this is the first time she has had a seizure as far as we know," Ariadne frowns. "Aside from that, nothing that she verbalized."

"Gossiping about me with my intern, Hannibal?" Will croaks from the bed, beautiful blue eyes blinking open. "I do hope you don't make this a habit."

Hannibal turns to her at once and takes her offered hand, leaning in for a chaste kiss. The sweet stench of a raging fever is overpowering this close. "Hello there, darling. At the risk of being a nuisance, allow me to say I told you so."

Will rolls her eyes, cheeks flushed. "Yes, yes. I didn't listen. So how serious is it?"

"Enough to cause a seizure and therefore enough reason to keep you at least overnight, if not more. The nature of this infection remains to be seen. We shall send serology and cultures; we will need urine samples and CSF, which will require a spinal tap; we will take CT scans and likely an MRI afterwards for better imaging. How does your head feel?" (2)

"Ugh. Worse after hearing you say that."

"Allow me to worry about everything and simply focus on allowing yourself to heal. Now, since Lisa is finished with her task, why don't we do a quick exam? Tell me your name."

"This again?" A sigh. "Willow Graham, 33, currently in Johns Hopkins, Baltimore. It's January 2011, but I've lost track what time it is and I don't have my watch on."

"I have it," Ariadne pipes in, "I took it while you were in the ambulance to make space for your IVs."

Hannibal nods. "Very well. Close your eyes tightly for me. Good. You can open them now. Raise your eyebrows as high as you can go... alright. Stick your out tongue... move it side to side... good. Follow my finger with your eyes only... all the way up and down... double vision? Black spots? No? Excellent. I will be shining a bright light in your eye here... and another one... my apologies. Shrug your shoulders. Raise both arms up now and close your eyes, keep them up for a count of ten..."

The rest of the assessment goes well, confirming Ariadne's initial findings. Will suffers through his
questions with a worn-down patience, indicating just how much she must be feeling the fatigue. Lisa types away at her computer and it isn't long before Yuriko herself pops into the room freshly showered and in a new set of surgical scrubs.

"Oh, excuse me, oh shit, they weren't kidding," she gapes. "I mean, uh, I'm so sorry to see you here as a patient, Agent Graham!"

"I assure you that you are no sorrier than me. I hope your day is going better than mine," Will grimaces in the poor parody of a smile.

"Eh, it's going," Yuriko shrugs, now awkwardly tucking herself between the edge of the stretcher and the piece of wall beside the door. "Sensei, spinal tap?"

"Yes, if you would prepare the supplies, please."

"Are you going to do it?" Will asks, looking up at him with hopeful eyes. "I'd prefer if you were to do it." (3)

Everyone in the room is aware that Hannibal should not, and yet not a single soul dares contradict him when he says yes. "I would prefer to do it as well."

Lisa looks mildly uncomfortable in her corner; Robbie ducks in and hands her a small bundle of papers with a motherly pat. "If anyone asks, neurology took too long. They do anyway. You wouldn't even be lying." Yuriko gives a nervous laugh.

"Jack, you should probably get back to Quantico," Will says, looking faintly hunted even as she so blantly dismisses her superior. "Bev and the others need you there on the case. Sounds like I'll be here a while."

Jack Crawford does not look too pleased about it but acquiesces with a rumble, handing his card to Hannibal on the way out. "Please keep me informed, Dr. Lecter. Get on the mend, Will, we need you out there."

"I'll try my best, Jack." Hannibal can hear the barely veiled irritation in her voice and has to bite down a smile.

Ariadne hands over Will's things, reluctantly intending to follow Jack out as she must. "I should get back to work as well. I'll let Beverly know you're alright; she was very worried."

Will takes her hand, gripping it with a smile truer than any she's attempted since she woke. "Thank you, Ariadne."

Ariadne swallows and nods. "You're welcome, Will."

Yuriko guides her friend out of the room, assuring Hannibal that she'll be back in just a second. The room is altogether much less claustrophobic without Jack glowering over the proceedings from his corner.

"Agent Crawford did not seem too pleased to lose his prized profiler," Hannibal hums, taking her hand again and giving it a kiss. "All the more reason for us to get you better faster."

Inexplicably, Hannibal means it, this intention to get her better. Is he going to put a name to her illness, then? Allow her to recover?

Will rubs her face with the other hand, groaning as she reclines back on the stretcher. "Fuck. I have an active case, Hannibal. This is not good. There's a killer out there and I'm lead on the case. Do you
'I think I'll have to take medical leave?'

"It would be for the best," Hannibal insists, his response surprising even himself. Very well. If so, then this shall be done the right way: he shall be the one, and the only one, to alleviate her suffering. She will walk away from this ordeal with invested trust and dependence upon him such that her life will be irrevocably entwined with his despite her many doubts and hidden misgivings.

He dislikes having to change his plans with such drastic speed, but consoles himself with the thought of her recovery. It will be a delight in and of itself to have Will tucked into his house and under the mercy of his care for the number of weeks it will take to resolve this infection. She will not be released to drive for a while after such a seizure and will therefore be rendered entirely dependent on him for all of her needs, a pleasing prospect to look forward to. Hannibal cannot wait.

Will, on the other hand, can only sigh, falling limp against her pillow. "The dogs."

"I shall take care of everything. I want you to focus on resting."

"Right. I'm not very good at that."

Hannibal only smiles, rising from his seat and releasing her hand. "Let Lisa take you to the bathroom to collect the urine sample. I'll step out to make some calls and be back for the spinal tap with Yuriko. Is your head still hurting?"

"Throbbing. Not very bad, but it's there."

"Alright. I shall prescribe a small dose of a narcotic for the pain; you will take it after you return. It should also help with the procedure."

He turns around to leave when Will catches the back of his scrub and tugs. "Hannibal?"

"Yes, mylimasis."

"I will get better, won't I?" she asks, voice trembling on the last word, betraying the depth of her fear. She holds on to it well.

"Of course you will, darling," Hannibal assures her, placing a soft kiss on her forehead. "I will personally see to it."

It would be wise to change his clothes prior to performing the spinal tap. Hannibal heads to the physician locker rooms on autopilot, all the while delving into his memory palace to store the foreign sensation of such intense concern in a safe place until he can reexamine it at a later time. Such vivid, novel experiences Will brings into his life. Time and again she proves herself a worthy investment of his time.

A five-minute shower later and he changes into a fresh set of scrubs. On the way back to the station, he makes a call to the in-house neurointensivist attending on rotation, Alan Whitmore, who agrees to take Will on as one of his inpatients despite not having seen her at all. (4)

"Sounds like a pretty bad case of encephalitis," Whitmore says, aligning with Hannibal's presumptive diagnosis. "The question is what kind. You'll be starting the workup down there?"
"Yes, and I will make calls to radiology to see if she can get into the MRI suite before going upstairs to a room. Will you take her in the ICU?"

"Nah, she's too stable for that. We'll just put her in the PCU, I'll stop by and see her there. Hey, the house sup may give you one of the suites if you ask nicely!"

"Ah, yes, a suite would be ideal," Hannibal does not argue the point; ICU or PCU makes little difference since he intends on getting Will discharged relatively quickly. And while the neurointensivists do not routinely take patients who are outside of the ICU, Hannibal has been here long enough to have a lot of sway with a lot of powerful people. "I do appreciate it, Alan. Please feel free to call me at anytime."

"Sure thing! Sorry your young lady isn't feeling so good, but we'll get her taken care of! I'll send my resident Davis over there to do the tap in a bit."

Hannibal hangs up as he turns the corner, lip curling in discontent. No green resident will be shoving a needle into Will's spine, not if he can help it. He cares not for how allegedly proficient this Davis is; he will perform the procedure. By the manner Yuriko hands him the LP tray at the door, she agrees.

"I'll just assist with whatever you need, sensei, I think I've got this skill down pretty good and don't need the practice," Yuriko nervously chirps. "Besides, if the vine is to be trusted, it sounds like Davis' taps always end up traumatic, so better you than him. Or me. Because, uh, I don't feel like I'm ready for that sort of pressure."

Together they step back into the bay, where Lisa is reconnecting Will to the monitors overhead. She is now in a clean hospital gown with the socks and the requisite armbands, but the look on both of their faces warn Hannibal of something amiss. Underneath the tang of hospital-grade bleach and the perfume he had picked for Will, he smells blood.

"What's wrong?" he asks them.

Lisa turns towards him but avoids his eyes; it is Will, with her characteristic grit, looking up at him to bear the news. "We got the urine sample, but — Hannibal, there was a lot of blood." She swallows with a click. "I think I miscarried."

Inexplicably, his heart thuds within his chest. Her words echo in the spaces between his halted thoughts, stirring something dark and old within him into waking. Is it rage? No. More melancholy, more visceral. Infinitely more painful. What is it, this feeling? It has been so long. All at once he feels cold, a cold that seeps into the bones. Winter.

Mischa.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, words slipping from her lips and disappearing before the sentiment even reaches his ears. Her shoulders slump in defeat; perhaps she has seen something in his expression, something in his eyes that convey blame or reproach.

But Hannibal does not blame her at all. In fact, the fault is his, and his alone.

He smooths his hand over her head and down around to cup her cheek, a gesture speaking of comfort. "It is no more your fault as it is mine. I should have noticed, but we were both too distracted."

Will nods, fingers flexing and relaxing in the bunched blankets in her lap. Hannibal sighs, closing his eyes for a moment and reaching within to exercise that iron control over his own emotions, shutting them into boxes, pushing them aside. They will keep. For now, he has to attend to his patient.
"Let us get this done, then, for the sooner we have you upstairs resting in your own room, the better off you will be. Yuriko, would you begin?"

Yuriko, who has frozen in her place with an almost comical horror painted on her face, jolts into motion and busies herself over the tray Hannibal has set on the table. Lisa likewise retreats to her computer, clearing her throat and clicking to navigate to her flowsheets. Hannibal turns back to Will now, giving her a kiss on her forehead and then ushering her to lay on her side.

"There will be a little pain, but most of it will be afterwards," Hannibal warns her. "The headache is what bothers most patients. Your back should not be too sore." And then, adding in a quiet murmur, "I've got you."

She squeezes his hand and closes her eyes. Submission, complete and trusting; she relinquishes herself into his hands.

He lowers the head of the stretcher, urges her into a fetal position and drapes the blanket over her rear so that she is not exposed. Yuriko helps him with the sterile gown and the gloves, having already prepared the tray. Lisa calls the time-out before they begin; Hannibal starts sterilizing the skin of her lower back.

A child, he thinks, a tendril of wayward thought escaping his tight walls. A child of our own. A family.

Oh, the possibility has always been there, but he has never taken advantage. That was before Will. And he has thought of it, dreamed of it even, the weight of a newborn in his arms, a child with his intelligence and Will's perception, his aptitudes and her gifts.

Now they have lost one. He will never know the weight of that child in his arms. He will never look into its eyes.

When he is assured that Will's flesh is numb enough to allow the entry of the spinal needle, he shuts down all other thought to focus on the task at hand. There will be time later. He flexes his gloved hand and takes the long needle from Yuriko, palpating the lumbar vertebrae one last time before sliding in. As soon as the needle penetrates the dura with a soft pop, cloudy fluid begins draining into the bottle. The infection is indeed in Will's brain.

Later that night, at the end of his long shift, Hannibal slips into Will's suite to find her asleep. Night has fallen, the hospital settling into a more restful repose around them as the bustle of the day subsides. He has spent the last ten hours keeping his walls as high and tight as he can manage, all the while tending to his myriad tasks, until there is time, silence, and solitude enough to contemplate everything in peace. It is, after all, beneath his reputation to allow personal concerns to interfere with the quality of his work.

Doubtless the news has made it far by now, Dr. Lecter's fiancée coming into ER after a seizure and a miscarriage. All he needs to do is hide behind the mourning mask to deflect the questions; he is not above using emotion as a shield. They will all be too polite and deferential to pry; it will help maintain their privacy as Will heals.

She was shuttled to the MRI suite after her spinal tap and then delivered to this room, where she has begun the first round of antivirals and steroids to treat the confirmed encephalitis. Hannibal has seen
the scans; she will be gratified to see just how much of her brain is on fire. At the very least, it shall ease her growing concern about her own sanity.

Inside, the room is dim and cool, the curtains parted to allow a glimmer of the city lights to slip within. Will turns at the sound of him sitting beside her bed. She reaches out a hand. "Hannibal?"

"Hello, mylimasis," he smiles for her, transferring to sit at the edge of her bed instead. He pulls her into an embrace and nuzzles her hair, which smells of lavender and jasmine still, betraying her warmth and life despite the impersonal sterility that surrounds her. "How do you feel? Any better?"

"Now that you're here, yes," she sighs, cheek resting against his heart. Her eyes are closed and she holds onto him with relief.

They sit in silence for a while, breathing in the dark. Hannibal can hear the distant hum of the working hospital from beyond the door. Bells ringing, alarms sounding, nurses going to and fro to attend to their tasks. The hospital never rests.

"I'm sorry about the b—miscarriage," Will stutters, voice muffled against his shirt. "I didn't know."

"Neither of us knew," Hannibal sighs, "though I should have suspected. About the child and about your condition, too. I am very disappointed at myself."

Her shoulders hunch. "Please don't be. It's not your fault."

"And neither is it yours," Hannibal points out. "I will not see you blame yourself for something that was entirely out of your control."

Will only makes a soft noise in response. He runs a palm down the length of her back, fingers skating over vertebrae until the low of her back. The bandage from the spinal tap is still there. Likely it is still tender.

"How is your headache? Has the nurse been helpful?"

This time, she pulls away to look up at him with tired eyes. "Better," she says, "and yes, I can tell you pulled some strings for me. Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Be unhappy and alone, as I would likewise be without you, darling." A kiss and a half before he shifts to lay her down again.

Regaining a beat of humour, she grins. "Here, Hannibal? Surely that's a little risqué even for you."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "Have we not established my lack of shame during a prior conversation?" But he rises to tuck the blankets around her, much to her conveyed displeasure. She rolls to inch and face towards where he now sits on the recliner. "Tomorrow, perhaps, when you are more comfortable here, I shall stop by the house and retrieve some items for us. Perhaps food as well. Tonight, I shall be here with you."

"You don't need to stay here all night," Will protests. "You're tired, I know; you can go home, I'll be fine."

"Hush, darling. Why don't you try to close your eyes and go to sleep? I will be here."

She sighs. "You're not even listening to me, are you?"

"Do not make me leave you when you are ill. I would not be able to sleep at all at home alone.
knowing that you are here without me." Yet again, Hannibal finds far more honesty in that statement than he expected, so much of it that he staggers underneath the weight.

It is true; he cannot suffer much separation from Will now. She is his, after all. The hospital is inherently a place of pain and misery; with her empathy, she would absorb all of it and deter her own healing. No, he must stay. He is her shield now when she has none. Only he is allowed to pierce through her deepest forts, after all. He has claimed that territory.

"So did you get to talk to the neurointensivist? What's the verdict? Am I certifiably insane?" she asks, head pillowed on her arm, eyes shining in the half-dark.

She expects an affirmative while hoping against it, a dichotomy of tenuous proportions. Hannibal sighs, interlinking his fingers and pillowing them atop his stomach in repose. "Dr. Whitmore and I both agree that your symptomatology indicates meningoencephalitis, likely of a viral nature. The serology from your CSF will take days to result in specific sensitivities but the imaging is very telling of encephalitis regardless of the kind; there are limbic and thalamic involvements, which explain the altered mental states, the memory loss, the dissociation. At risk of sounding trite, my darling, I believe your brain is on fire." (5)

Will snorts. "Could've told you that myself."

"I believe you did at one point," Hannibal recalls. "I did not listen to you."

"Hannibal, stop." They exchange a look; this argument will be a long-standing one between them, it seems. "I guess I should make it an official medical leave, then, since I'll be here a short while."

"You don't have to be," Hannibal surprises her. "We may, perhaps, persuade Drs. Whitmore and Patel to release you to my care so that you can continue your course of antivirals and steroids at home. It is not unheard of."

"Is that all there is to it? Antivirals and steroids?" Yet again, Will sounds simultaneously doubtful and hopeful.

"They will prescribe physical therapy, which walking the dogs should help provide. Antipyretics: nothing more than Tylenol. Perhaps prescription anti-inflammatory. Still, nothing we could not attend to at home. When there is a need for follow-up lab work, we can drive in for an outpatient blood draw."

"So when can we discharge me?"

Hannibal chuckles at the sudden light in her eyes. "We shall talk to them come morning. If we both employ our considerable capacities towards a common goal, we should achieve substantial results."

"Okay," she sighs, settling into her pillow with more ease. Yet her eyes remain open, defiantly so, shining in the dark, lifted towards him.

More than an hour passes before she surrenders to her fatigue. Hannibal sits vigil at her bedside, watching the outlines of her slumbering form in the dark. She breathes deep and easy, her sleep undisturbed now that her fevers are being tended. Hannibal has let it stew for far too long.

When this entire endeavor began, this delicate dance of seducing Willow Graham, it was with the intention of securing one of the most intriguing prey he has ever come across, nothing more and nothing less. It is not the first time Hannibal has used seduction as a means to an end; the instances before Will are rare and noteworthy but are there nonetheless. Now, though, the game has advanced so far out of Hannibal's predicted path that it is becoming unclear how much of it remains a game
and how much of himself he has inadvertently committed into her.

Because he is committed, that much is clear after today. His visceral reaction to the news of the miscarriage — the hot-cold rage, the bitter disappointment — can only mean one thing. Will has indeed earned herself a permanent place in Hannibal's life, heavily weighting his decision towards keeping her alive instead of designing her death. It surprises him, this and the strength of his affection for her. It must be fate's way of reminding him that he is still human, just like Robbie had tried to tell him. Better and darker and infinitely more dangerous than the rest, but still, at the core, bitterly, beautifully human.

He has always known this, but true to his nature, even he can delude himself into thinking that he rests above such earthly attachments. This is not true; it has simply been too long since anyone was worthy.

Will is worthy.

A decision coalesces in Hannibal's mind overnight as he sits and watches over his betrothed. Will is no longer prey, no; he must have care never to forget this again. Soon, she will become more; indeed, it will be Hannibal's hands to help her true nature emerge from the ashes of her old life. That is his responsibility and unique privilege, and when it is done, when she can finally see, only then will they truly be as one.

In the morning, Hannibal stays only long enough to speak with Whitmore and Patel during their very early morning rounds.

"I don't see why not," Whitmore shrugs, looking to Patel for support. "It seems a waste of time to keep you here; you'd probably prefer to recover at home anyway."

Will nods, bundled underneath her blankets and wide-eyed as she looks up at her attending physician. Her hand clutches tight at Hannibal's fingers, cold but full of hope.

"You'd need to take leave," Venkatesh Patel raises both eyebrows at Hannibal, knowing full well how rarely he does so. "Michael might faint when you put in your request."

"I'll certainly let you know if he does," Hannibal chuckles in response. "Will, do you have any questions for them?"

Will shakes her head, clearing her throat. "Only that I'll need leave documents signed by the attending. The Bureau won't accept Jack's word on it, even though the seizure happened on campus. Formalities."

"Hannibal knows my details but here's my card anyway," Whitmore says. "Just have them send everything to my office and I'll attend to it as soon as I can."

"Thank you, doctor," Will nods. She plays with the card in her hand.

They move on after the requisite pleasantries and handshakes all around, collecting their residents from the hallway where they were told to wait. Will's eyes track them before the door falls shut.

"They had ducklings but the ducklings didn't come in," Will notes aloud. "Is that because of you?"
"Likely," Hannibal smiles, arranging her bedside table in front of her with the triangles of wheat toast and orange juice Will had requested. He will go home and bring back a more substantial meal for later, something light but still appetizing to Will's yet uncooperative tongue. "Whitmore has been a guest at my table once, Patel twice. They both know I am paying attention to everything that is being done for you. It is wise to disallow the residents access to your case because I will make my displeasure known if there is any mistake — and I know who to talk to."

She snorts, nibbling at the edge of the too-burnt toast. "Blatant much? One would think the hospital is a place where such things don't sway decisions."

"Au contraire, ma chérie, the hospital is an institution just like any other," Hannibal corrects her, sipping his coffee (from his own office, of course) as he sits down. "Political, petty, very oligarchic. There is an economy in it too, a system of trades and favors. Human nature, what can I say."

"Would I receive the same level of care if I were some random person who happened to collapse outside on the sidewalk?"

"Because this is Johns Hopkins, you would... only perhaps a little slower and without the special suite," Hannibal smiles. "Elsewhere, however, that may not be the case. There are some hospitals that are truly atrocious. I've been to some. They should be burned to the ground."

Will chuckles around her now buttered toast. She is attempting to mask the burnt flavor, of course to no avail. Hannibal makes note to bring bread for later.

After she finishes her breakfast and receives her next dose of medicine from the nurse, Hannibal bids her a quick goodbye. "I shall return soon. Is there anything you would like for me to fetch?"

She asks for something to pass time with, a book or perhaps her tablet. Hannibal takes her coat and her work bag with him. She looks quite unwilling to be left alone.

"Soon," he kisses her hand, thumb pressing on the ring she now wears on her finger. "Sleep while I am gone."

"God, haven't I slept enough?"

"It will help, Will. Please try. For me."

He leaves her there, sitting dwarfed by her white blankets in bed, and against his own wildest expectations, something wrenches in his chest at their short separation. Oh, how attached he has become. But he does not decry it, instead revels in the novel desperate sensation, for it is a colorful world with his Will. Hannibal has to smile.

"Of course, you must," Michael Albertson agrees over the phone, "family is family! And it's about time you took a break yourself."

Hannibal responds with words of gratitude as he quickly juliennes herbs for Will's soup. "I appreciate your time, Michael. I'll speak with Jean-Christophe and Annelise to arrange my coverage you won't have to worry about it."

"Talk to Benjamin as well, he's been wanting to do some overtime lately to help fund another one of
his vacations. I'll be in the office tomorrow so I should be able to get your paperwork signed then.”

They bid goodbye as Hannibal retrieves the chicken bones from the bubbling broth. He replaces it with the herbs and spices that will give the flavor depth and complexity. Over the span of the following hour, as he prepares food for three meals and gathers a few items to bring to the hospital, he conducts a series of phone calls to colleagues who all owe him favors. They have all heard the news, of course, and are more than eager to offer their help. Hannibal maintains an air of distracted concern, every bit the family man in a bind; they are none the wiser.

At this rate, there must indeed be a dinner party in the spring, if only for these people who are helping him out. It would be the polite thing to do. Perhaps even to celebrate the wedding?

While the food is finishing, he showers once more and dresses, this time into one of his suits. Somber colors and sharper contours, a different thematic to befit the sobering occasion. He packs for Will a full change of clothes from the wardrobe he has been building for her. The dogs are thankfully well-behaved, meekly trotting after him for a quick trip to relieve themselves outside. Will has trained them thoroughly; they have not yet made a mess indoors.

The golden retriever, Winston, noses at his leg as he begins to load the food into the car. Hannibal looks down to meet the dog's eyes; Winston lowers his head and whines.

"Are you looking for Will? She's at the hospital."

Perhaps the animal can smell Will on him. It is likely the dogs have known for a while that she is ill. They are loyal creatures, her dogs. Hannibal herds them back inside, keeping them in the two sitting rooms and living area but out of the kitchen. He sets down an indoor litter for them just in case.

"I will be back tomorrow with your master. Have patience."

Jack Crawford calls him while he is on the way back to the hospital, a mere ten to fifteen-minute drive from his house. Jack sounds awkward. Tense. The ground between them is still uncertain — Jack yet unsure of how to approach Hannibal in his rapidly evolving role in Will's life. Hannibal does not intend to make it any easier for him.

"Dr. Lecter, good morning. Hope I'm not interrupting."

"And a good morning to you too, Mr. Crawford; you are not interrupting anything," Hannibal responds. "What can I help you with?"

"Just checking in to see how Will is doing. I thought it best not to give her a direct call, in case she's not up to talking."

Jack now considers him Will's proxy; excellent. "She's feeling better this morning, thank you for asking. I shall let her know you called. She has begun her treatments since last night."

"What exactly is she being treated for?" Jack asks intently.

Hannibal hears a different question, but answers contrarily to be difficult. "Meningoencephalitis of yet unknown origin, but likely viral. It has been brewing for a while. We will know more in forthcoming days."

It forces Jack to ask the question he really means. "How long will she be hospitalized, do you think?"

"Unable to say for certain at this time, it's too early to know. At the very least her treatments will take
two to three weeks." Jack needs not to know that Will can be home as soon as tomorrow, does he?

"Right. Well. Please inform me if there are any developments. And extend my well-wishes to Will. We need her to get better soon. There aren't exactly alternatives to her talents around." Hannibal hears the irritation, the disappointment, perhaps a shade of regret.

"Of course, I shall do so. Good day, Mr. Crawford."

"Thank you, Dr. Lecter."

It seems Jack only wants her well for his own designs, because Will is a useful tool, his best and most versatile of the lot. Small wonder her short time with him has bred resentment. Perhaps the remorse Hannibal heard is for Jack's callousness towards Will, but it does not change the terms of their relationship; Jack is, after all, a man on a mission. Everything is a weapon.

Hannibal will tell Will that Jack called. When Will asks, he will recount their conversation verbatim and with as much clarity as he can muster. She will glean the same conclusion he has made, and it will create further distance between her and her superior, this man whose regard and opinion she must eventually betray if she is to become Hannibal's partner in every sense of the word. Because Hannibal loves her, he will not shelter her from the pain. No; her becoming will be painful, but the pain is necessary to break the chains fettering her beautiful mind. But she is strong. Hannibal knows she will survive. They are, after all, two of the same kind.

Before returning to Will, he makes a stop at his office. Hannibal parks at his reserved spot by one of the ER's back entrances and makes his way through familiar doors, though he does not get far. News has traversed the grapevine; his nurses catch him at the desk.

"We heard the news, doc," Isa, today's charge nurse, approaches with concern. "How is she doing?"

"Much better now, thank you, Isa," Hannibal dips his head. "Might you have seen Yuriko around? I need to have a quick word with her."

"I think she's in your office catching up on paperwork. I take it we won't be seeing you for a little while?"

"Yes, I'll be taking leave for a week, tentatively. You shall have to keep the rabble under control in the meantime," Hannibal kindly tells her.

"Me? Nah," Isa grins, her youth shining through as her working countenance falls away. She is really quite young, though experienced, capable, and very smart. Hannibal had endorsed her for charge training, because he'd rather train the shift supervisors while they are fresh and untainted, with fewer bad habits to unlearn from other places. "I'm part of the rabble, doc, I'll leave the controlling to Robbie and Scott," she laughs.

Hannibal smiles and carries on after thanking her for her concern. Indeed, Yuriko is to be found at his office, fingers flying over the keys of her laptop even as she gnaws on the spent core of an apple.

"Oh, sensei, hi!" she looks up in surprise. "What are you doing here? I got this, please, go back to Agent Graham!"
"I am here for coffee," Hannibal explains, "and yes, I will return upstairs once I have some coffee in hand."

"There's coffee upstairs," Yuriko cheekily points out, entirely aware that he decries the sewage the hospital calls coffee.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about." He sets down his bags and goes about making himself coffee, just one tumbler, because Will should not ingest caffeine just yet. "Jean-Christophe, Annelise, and Benjamin have all agreed to cover for me this week. Refer to them for assistance, but do not hesitate to call me if you have outstanding questions that they are not able to address."

"Just one week, sensei? Do you think she'll be out of here by then? I mean, her encephalitis looks pretty bad, I should think at least two weeks inpatient for the antibiotic therapy and to make sure she has no more seizures..."

"I've negotiated to have her discharged to my care. I expect to leave with her tomorrow. My leave may extend for longer than a week, we shall have to see." Briefly, he sits down at his desk and fires up the computer to compose a few quick emails and send a handful of signed documents to officiate his leave. He wants all the bases to be covered such that no one can say a thing about it, because he does not plan on returning until the proper time. His leave will be spent entirely in Will's company, no exceptions. One mustn't squander such serendipitous opportunities in life, after all. "As soon as Will is feeling better, I shall host a small dinner at the house. Bring your friend so that we may thank her properly for what she has done for Will."

Yuriko gasps and straightens and vibrates in her chair. "Oh, thank you, sensei! We'll definitely come!" Her excitement is understandable, for though she has heard about Hannibal's table, this is the first time she has been invited to come. Then again, it has been a while since he last had guests over for dinner; he has been too preoccupied with Will.

"Again, call me if they are not satisfying your curiosity," Hannibal instructs her, shutting down his computer now and picking up the bags once more. "The only foolish question is—"

"—the question I don't ask," she parrots obediently, "yes, sensei, I will! Now shoo! Go see Agent Graham; she's probably wondering where you are!"

Will is likely relieved that Hannibal is not hovering over her. Nevertheless, Hannibal plans on hovering. He leaves Yuriko behind and navigates the many turns of the hallways until the elevator delivers him to Will's floor. At the nurse's station he finds Will's partner, Beverly Katz, carrying a large plush toy that looks suspiciously like one of Will's dogs.

"Agent Katz," he approaches, interrupting her heated conversation with the harassed-looking nurse. Beverly Katz spins around and groans in relief. "Oh, thank god you're here. They won't let me see Will since I'm not one of her 'designated visitors'. Will you please talk some sense into them?"

Hannibal nods at the nurse, who recognizes him and waves them along with a relieved sigh. "She will be happy to see you," he says, "though you will forgive me, I only brought enough food for two."

"Oh, no, it's alright! Already ate," Beverly grins, patting her belly as they walk down the hall. "How's she doing?"

"Much better this morning. She will make a full recovery, I shall ensure it."

"I'm sure you will, and I'm glad," Beverly nods, shifting the plush dog under her arm. "She's been
looking rough lately. Not that we've had an overwhelming amount of cases, but each one is hard on her, I can see it. Too bad Jack refuses to."

"As Will once told me, her job is not good for her, but unfortunately she is good for it."

"Yep. Her tough luck that she's the very best we've got."

Hannibal opens the door and is about to step aside to let Beverley in when a familiar voice hotly declares, "I don't think you're ready for that sort of commitment, not when you made the decision while you were ill!"

Alana Bloom, of course. And she would be allowed in, on account of being Will's psychiatrist.

Will's eyes fly to him at once, bright blue and looking hunted. Heeding her wordless call, Hannibal quietly steps into the room, relinquishing his baggage to the side and going at once to her side. He pulls her into a one-armed embrace, pointedly pressing a kiss into the crown of her head. "Hello, darling."

"Hi," Will quietly responds, returning the embrace and then seizing his hand when he withdraws.

"Dr. Bloom," Hannibal turns, acknowledging Alana, who sits on Will's other side with a most uncomfortable expression on her face. "I do apologize, we seem to have walked in on an impassioned discussion." He knows full well what they were discussing, of course, it is obvious: Alana does not think that Will should marry him. Alana, therefore, is placing herself squarely as an adversary. A most ill-advised position, to be sure.

"Well!" Beverly brightly cuts through the simmering tension, thrusting the plush dog into Will's arms. "Hey there, stranger! You look better!"

A small, reluctant smile ekes out of Will's mask. "Hi, Bev. Thanks for coming," she takes the plush dog upon her lap and begins petting its fur.

Another moment passes in nervous silence before Beverly clears her throat. "Is this a good time? Because if not, I can, uh, come back. Later. When there's less, er, this," she makes a vague fluttering wave with her hand.

"No, please, sit," Will hastily reassures, and even Alana shakes her head, retreating a fraction from Will's bedside.

Hannibal offers a calm response to Beverly's discomfort. "You have already come this far, Agent Katz. You should at least stay a while." It will deter Alana from pursuing her argument, which distresses Will so clearly that she is left gripping his hand in desperation. She is ill and in no form to defend herself; truly Alana should know better. Besides, he will not have Will doubting her decision. Hannibal has already claimed her. She is his.

"Oh-kay, if you say so," Beverly gingerly lowers herself to sit at the end of the bed, which alarms the moment she sets her weight on it. She jumps back upright. "Oh shit, what'd I do."

"Just the bed alarm," Hannibal reaches over to turn it off, unlocking the screen at the foot of the bed to do so. "The nurses here are trained well."

"The patients here are prisoners," Will translates with a snort. "Can't get up to the bathroom without supervision."

"Nor should you," Hannibal gently chides, "since we cannot be sure if and when you might have
another seizure. We wouldn't want to add a head injury to the mix, now, do we?"

Will sighs, exchanging a long-suffering look with Beverly. "Yes, doc."

Beverly snickers.

But of course, he mustn't exclude Will's other guest, however unwelcome. Hannibal turns to Alana, making perhaps the first instance of intentional eye contact since they parted ways years ago, and says, "Dr. Bloom, your recent study on neurodiversity was a riveting read. Congratulations on your commendations, they are all well-deserved."

Alana has not lost her hero-worship of him as proven by the flush that creeps up the line of her neck. Hannibal will not deny the possibilities, once upon a time, but he now has Will and is convinced of his better fortunes. Fondly, he strokes Will's wrist with his thumb where their hands lay intertwined atop the scratchy hospital blankets.

"Thank you, that is quite a compliment coming from someone such as yourself," Alana nods, as always in admirable control of her countenance. "The field itself is quite controversial as you know; it helps to hear encouragement from any quarter, as a balm against the more... caustic remarks I sometimes receive."

Beverly and Will both snort in unison. Will smiles down at her lap. "Did Troy Benedict send you another thinly veiled 'critique' via email?"

Alana rolls her eyes. "Without fail. That man has nothing better to do with his time, I swear to god."

"He likes you, that's all," Will half-grins, eyes twinkling with mirth. "Classic playground flirting. He's pulling your pigtails."

"Yes, well, I am more liable to slap him for it than anything else."

"Last boy who did that to me in kindergarten, I kicked in the nuts. They never tried again," Beverly points out helpfully.

"Dr. Benedict has an unfortunate propensity to attract to women who are far more intellectually capable than he is," Hannibal says. "Small wonder he remains unmarried."

"Burn," Beverly snickers.

"You've met him?" Will asks.

"Several times, during the conferences sponsored by the APA. He is somewhat of a fixture in that circle, owing to his tenure at Columbia."

Will hums, returning her avoidant gaze to her lap once more. Her hands fidget, even the one in his grasp. "He always has choice things to say about me whenever I come up in discussion. He lands on the far end of the 'curse' side of the argument. Thinks what I have is a particular brand of crazy that should be observed and dissected, but contained. Behind glass walls and soundproofed doors, if possible."

"Dick," says Beverly.

"Not on my watch," assures Hannibal. "Fool for them if they do not possess the capacity to understand you. Don't concern yourself with their narrow minds, Will. What you are capable of far exceeds the reaches of their marginal imaginations."
"I haven't read the study in question," Beverly looks to Alana. "Is it about Will?"

At once, Alana becomes uncomfortable, shifting in her chair in an attempt to hide it. "Not... precisely. It discusses a broader topic, not a single individual. Will's singular condition is mentioned — with her permission, of course."

"Relish it," Will huffs. "You'll be one of the very few who will be given that permission."

"And I do," Alana assures her with equanimity and genuine verve, "relish the gift of your trust, Will. I use the example of her capacities as a narrative example for the concept of neurodiversity," she continues to explain to Beverly. "I am a firm proponent for it, though my enthusiasm is not always well-received."

"And some people think it's poor form to use me as an example," Will points out. "A lot of times, I agree with them."

"Stop that," Alana admonishes in what sounds like an old argument between them. Hannibal observes their relationship in constant flux, Will and Alana, two women with whom he has crossed paths just as they have crossed paths with each other. They must have met after he parted ways with Alana a little more than half a decade ago.

"It's true. Sometimes what I have ventures into the territory of truly crazy. No use in denying the truth."

"Every genius has an element of crazy," Beverly declares, squaring her shoulders and tilting her chin up as if to dare anyone contradict her. "At least you give yours purpose. Besides, who are we to question the whims of nature? Infinite diversity in infinite combinations. We need to remember that what we know as normal is almost always a sociopolitical construct. But some people's grey matter can be too hypodense for that higher order of thinking, what can you do?" she shrugs, dark curls sliding off her shoulders to fall behind her back.

Will is smiling so hard at her that her cheeks are dimpling. "Bev, did you just quote Star Trek in a scholarly conversation?"

Beverly stage-gasps. "So Willow Graham does know something of pop culture! Color me astonished!"

They all laugh, Hannibal turning an appreciative glance at Beverly. Will does attract the most interesting sort of people.

"Speaking of astonished, I wanted to let you know," Beverly leans forward, "we closed the case last night."

Will is surprised. "You found Georgia?"

"Well," Beverly hedges, playfulness falling away from her eyes, "we didn't precisely find her. She surrendered herself."

"What? How?"

"She was lucid enough to call 911 and told the dispatch she thought she was dead. She even gave them her name." And then, as if to rethink her next words, Beverly slowly continues, "Will, we found her at your house."

Alana gasps; Hannibal inclines his head in interest.
"She called from your landline. She was inside the house. I about died when they traced it there, and then I remembered you were admitted here already, thank fuck. — I mean, it sucks that you're sick, but uhh. You get what I mean."

A thick silence descends over them for a moment, full of the morbid possibilities had Will been left alone with a murderess at her house in the countryside. Then Will turns to Hannibal with a vindicated light in her eyes and says, "That night, I went to your house with all the dogs — I thought someone else was in my house. Someone else was there with me. Someone had followed me home. And the dogs — they knew. Someone was hiding under the bed."

"Jesus Christ on a stick," Beverly mutters.

"I thought I was imagining it," Will whispers, looking blankly at the wall behind Hannibal. "I thought it was all in my head."

"Your instincts are sharper than the finest blade, even though your reason tends to evade you with this illness addling your mind," Hannibal gently reminds her. "I would have thought that by now you would have learned to trust it."

Will grimaces in the parody of a smile. "These days I rarely trust any of myself."

"Well," Alana inhales, "what matters is that you are now here, receiving the proper treatment, and not out there with more of those crime scenes. Jack can sit and wait a few weeks. Don't let him pressure you back into the field too soon."

"Oh, he won't," Hannibal assures her with steel in his voice. "Will is to rest and recover. I shall personally see to it."

Alana nods, despite her obvious discomfort with their relationship. "Well, good. At least I know Jack won't be able to bully his way around Will with you."

Will snorts. "Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Hey, fair's fair, she's right, girl. You don't say no to Jack very well," Beverly points out.

Will just gives them all a windy sigh and clutches the plush dog to her chest, reclining against the pillows in a show of surrender. On cue, the nurse knocks on the door and pokes her head to check if it's a good time to intrude.

Alana takes the chance to excuse herself out, giving Will a short hug, well-wishes, and a promise to visit again soon. "Lots of work to see to. I'm due for a late lunch with Dr. Sanders downtown. She wants help editing a few chapters of her book."

"Please extend my greetings and congratulations on Dr. Sanders' latest appointment. She was by far the best choice they could have made," Hannibal bids, exchanging a cordial handshake with Alana as well.

"Talk to you later, Alana."

"Yes, I'll call you about the dogs, alright? Get well soon, Will!"

She leaves in a swirl of periwinkle blue and floral perfume. The nurse comes in after her, performing a quick check on Will and hanging the next dose of acyclovir on piggyback. Beverly claps her hands together in renewed vigor. "So! Who wants to explain what that godawful tension between the three of you was all about? I want the juicy details!"
Will groans; Hannibal chuckles. He decides then that Beverly can stay Will's friend.

The visits drain what little energy she has regained overnight. Will succumbs to a restorative sleep after they finish what she abhorrently named *chicken ginger soup* for a late lunch. Hannibal turns the lights off and pulls the shades down, rendering the room in a half-light that conveys a settled calm over the otherwise bright environment. As she did last night, Will curls up on her side, pillow under her ear, facing towards his recliner by the window. There is no sound but their breathing and the distant noise of the hospital; Hannibal has even silenced the alarms on the monitor overhead so that they only sound at the nurses' station.

Her features are a fine study in light and shadow like this, chiaroscuro of the most masterful hand. A delicacy in the gentle slope of her eyelashes and the round lines of her lips. A pleasing symmetry. She really is quite beautiful, though she doesn't like to think so.

In this quiet moment, he allows himself a brief flight of imagination, a fleeting fantasy he would otherwise ruthlessly curb: would their child have looked like her, with winter blue eyes and rose-like features, a keen intellect, a brilliant sight? Or would the child have been more like himself, purposeful and complicated, with a sense for aesthetics and an appreciation for the brutality of life?

In his distant memory, in the forever frozen gardens of his palace he infrequently treads, there sits a little girl with white-gold hair and beautiful blue eyes, waiting for him while playing in the snow. She used to call him *big brother*. She loved him beyond question and without conditions. She depended on him for her life. He lost her so quickly he didn't even have time to understand what it was he had lost until many years later, and by then, it was much too late.

The nurse had informed them earlier, after Beverly had left, after they had finished their lunch, that the pregnancy test had returned positive, but the ultrasound was negative. Will was right; she had lost a child.

Hannibal refuses to allow her to feel guilt for the fact. It is neither her fault nor his, and guilt would interfere with her recovery besides. Hannibal needs her to recover. She will recover, and they will try again. Will is going to give him a family; it is only a matter of circumstance and time.

Settling a hand over the crown of her head, Hannibal reclines into his chair and begins to realign his plans. He remains quiet like this until almost an hour later, nearly nine at night, when there is a knock on the door.

"May I come in?" the familiar voice asks. Hannibal rises to prevent it.

"She is asleep," Hannibal says, stepping beyond the doors and allowing it to quietly click shut behind him. "A little late for you, no?"

"Leftover committee paperwork," Michael Albertson shrugs, "so I thought I'd come by and say hi. How is your young lady doing?"

"Thank you for asking; she is well on the way to recovery. Antivirals, steroid course, and rest is what they have prescribed."

"Sounds like a good prescription to me," Michael nods. He then catches the eye of a passing nurse and asks her, "Good evening, does your lounge have coffee?"
Noting the name on Michael's white coat, the nurse nods and directs them to a door further down the hallway which requires a badge to enter. Hannibal follows as Michael goes in search for caffeine. The man has clearly come all this way for more than just a paltry effort to check in on Will.

As soon as they step into the nurse's lounge, which is still empty this early in the night, Michael turns to him with a heavy sigh. "So I received a formal complaint from one of the residents today about you."

Hannibal straightens his spine, a minute change of posture that communicates a sizable amount of indignation. Michael has known him long enough to pick up on it, of course.

"Relax, relax, I didn't push it forward," Michael sighs, flapping a hand as he turns to busy himself with a cup of coffee. The machine gurgles as it spits out black sludge into the styrofoam cup; Hannibal's lip minutely curls in distaste. Even the smell is atrocious. "It was from Srinath, which somehow doesn't surprise me. Just came to my desk today. I'm shelving it — there's no basis to it that they can prove, anyway — but I wanted to let you know. I'm moving his rotations down so that he'll be with Benjamin and Annelise's block more than yours."

"I assume it is because of Yuriko," Hannibal says, because Michael can't seem bring himself to say it.

"Yes, well, they do have their collegial tensions, the residents," Michael shrugs again, stirring too much sugar into his coffee. Well, one would indeed need that much to mask the abhorrent taste. But Hannibal does not grace his statement with a response, remaining stony and silent as he stands by the nurse's lounge table.

Eventually, Michael caves with a sigh. "Alright, yes, there were, shall we say, more salacious allegations thrown around. Irresponsibly, might I add. I don't know if Srinath understands how this makes him look, accusing his colleagues of fraternization without proof and beyond reason. I mean, you're engaged, for goodness' sake. Who did he think would buy it?"

"I have not made the fact public until recently, and never within a circle that would include him. It is likely he did not know of Will."

"Obviously," Michael snorts. "So that leaves us here, with a mess no one needs. Well, I'm shelving it. Yes, you have your favorites, but we all do. If he's upset that he's no one's favorite, perhaps he needs to address his own behavior before he starts throwing dirt and hitting the wrong people."

"And perhaps you ought to tell him that," Hannibal points out a little unkindly.

"Ugh, now I know why you seem so happy you didn't get this job."

"It is enough that I teach them. I do not wish to have to discipline them."

"That makes both of us."

The door opens and a nurse barges in, looking faintly harassed but lightening once she sees the two of them. "Good evening, docs! Found the coffee, did you?"

"Yes, thank you," Michael smiles. "Just a pick-me-up to last me on the way home."

"Well, be careful out there! They say it'll snow again tonight," she bids, already on her way past them to the women's restrooms.
They take that as their cue to leave, Hannibal heading back towards Will's room as Michael makes for the opposite hallway. "Call me if you need anything, Hannibal, I'll catch you up later."

Hannibal thanks him and steps back into Will's quiet room, where she sleeps heavily under the weight of her illness. In the darkness, he smiles; not all of his plans are lost. Some things are still falling into place.

Sometime after midnight, Will wakes with a start. Hannibal, whose hand still rests on her hand, feels her move and wakes as well. She is breathing harshly, raggedly, in the dark. Hannibal reaches for the light switch on the wall and at once they are bathed in the soft glow of a lamp.

"Will," he says, pitching his voice low and calm. He slowly shifts forward, replacing his hand where it was on the crown of her head. "Look at me."

She turns, slow and vacant; her face lacks any light. She is inhabited by nothingness.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes," she responds, barely above a whisper and as if she were speaking from underwater.

"Where are you right now, Will? What do you see?"


Truly, were she born in ancient times, she would have been coveted as a seer, plied with gifts from emperors, bathed in oils and myrrh, clothed in drapes of silk and gold. That, or she would have been killed for her visions.

"Do you know who I am, Will? Do you know where you are?"

"Yes," she sighs, eyelids now drooping as her heart rate slows down. "I am at a crossroads. You are the darkness shrouding my path." She closes her eyes now, breathing a long sigh. "It's alright. I fell in love with the darkness long ago."

Hannibal sits there for a few quiet minutes and marvels at her, this woman whose perception is so unnaturally sharp that she sees through to the truth of the world without even realizing it. He leans forward, placing a soft kiss on her forehead. "Soon you will see, mylimasis. And when you open your eyes, I will be here."

"Okay," she agrees, windy and distant as she sinks back into her dreams. "I'll see you soon."

By the time Hannibal has replaced his hand on her head, she is asleep once again. She is running a low-grade fever, a banked fire simmering away within her brain. The infection is in fact an insidious survivor; it eats away at her grip on reality. Dreams bleed into wakefulness, hallucinations in more than one sensory sphere. Loss of her sense of self. Loss of control.

All well and good. To Hannibal she has now ceded control. He strokes her hair away from her forehead and turns the lamp off once again. Darkness shrouds them as they rest in silence together.

In the morning, their next act commences.
REFERENCES

(1) Encephalitis is inflammation of the brain due to many different causes and therefore often causes dysfunctions such as seizures and transitory losses of consciousness. The show’s depiction of encephalitis is generally accurate except for the part where they used anti-NMDAR encephalitis instead of a likelier infection.

Hannibal performs a comprehensive neurological exam on Will in this chapter, which helps isolate focal symptoms (she has none) and rule out or clinically confirm a stroke. Strokes are 100% more likely than any other neurological diagnosis and is often under-represented in the media; everyone knows about heart attacks, but no one thinks about the brain. Well, we can fix the heart (it’s just a pump) but if a stroke knocks out half your brain — and it can very quickly — there is very little we can do for it in a very small window of time. I wish more people were more educated about it. — In fact, here, I’ll go doctor-mode and send you to a place where you can learn more about stroke.
Educate yourselves, everyone. It may mean your life!

Speaking of another thing about which most people are unaware: as a patient, you can usually arrange for an ER-to-ER or ER-to-hospital transfer if you don’t like the hospital the ambulance brought you to. Paramedics will take you to the nearest equipped emergency department to stabilize you but you can always choose otherwise once you are stabilized. Insurance takes care of the transfer cost a majority of the time. (GET MEDICAL INSURANCE, OH MY GOD.) In fact, I highly suggest transferring out to a bigger hospital for anything serious. Take my word for it. Don’t sit in a small hospital for days because they don’t know what the fuck they’re doing majority of the time. Go to a university hospital in the nearest major city. I don’t say this because I work in one; I say this because I’ve seen people die because they waited.

My long rant on anti-NMDAR encephalitis (sorry not sorry, feel free to skip):

In the show, they used anti-NMDAR encephalitis as Will’s working diagnosis, which, apart from being highly improbable and badly diagnosed and wrongly portrayed, is also incredibly rude. I was majorly upset about it; in fact, my major upsetting is one of the primary reasons why this fic is even a thing. I get mad about the little inconsistencies in fiction like this because it breaks the illusion for me. My brain spots the mistake at once and will never let me forget about it. I had to stop at S1E10 for this reason, and to this day, I have not watched a whit of S2 or S3. (Yes, I am serious. All I know of them are from fics I’ve read.)

Anti-NMDAR encephalitis is a) thought to be genetic from current research, b) incredibly rare, c) occurs highly largely in females under 30 (81% of reported cases), d) recurs many times over the patient’s short lifespan, and e) incredibly lethal. It is also far more prevalent with Asians, Africans, and Hispanics. The epidemiological data on this disease is limited due to its rarity so there is much yet we don’t know. The diagnosis is very tricky through a differential process and is only ‘confirmed’ by refuting other possible causes of the patient’s symptoms. Too often, smaller hospitals will make mistakes with the diagnostic process or dismiss it as a psychiatric case, especially in patient populations that are more at risk for psychiatric disorders. (Though to be honest with you, when we see young people behaving in very odd, erratic behavior – see Brain On Fire by Susannah Calahan – we immediately suspect this disease in our ICU. We get all the weird cases in our unit, since we are the only university hospital with a specialist neuro ICU serving North Texas, West Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, parts of Louisiana, and parts of New Mexico. Baylor has a university here but
they don't have a neuro ICU like ours.)

In the show, Will had an MRI to confirm this diagnosis, which is so wrong it made me laugh so hard I cried. The diagnostic battery you have to go through in order to be able to put this down on a patient’s chart is insane, but primarily:

- CT + CTA and MRI + MRA to rule out other causes (e.g. tumors, aneurysms & bleeds, hydrocephalus, and other gross anatomical issues),

- a spinal tap to sample CSF for all sorts of things (e.g. infections, prion disorders like Mad cow disease, other types of meningitis such as tubercular, fungal, and syphilitic)

- a full “rainbow” of labs drawn from the blood in order to make sure nothing else is hiding in the body

- a psych workup by a specialist to rule out a psychiatric diagnosis

- in some cases, given sufficient suspicion, we’ll draw blood samples to send out to the CDC and Mayo Clinic so they can compare it to other documented cases of this disease.

Having the privilege of doing my residency in a university hospital, I’ve had personal experience treating three cases of anti-NMDAR encephalitis in our neuro ICU (which is a lot) and it is not pretty. My attending told us an anecdote about how this disease is suspected of being an underlying cause of historical accounts of demonic possessions, and I believe him 100%. I will never be able to forget the sound of my first such patient screaming down the whole ICU hall while thrashing against her four-point restraints (both arms and legs tied down). She was 23, Hispanic, and tinier than tiny me, but had the strength of four football players—enough to rock the heavy ICU bed, wheels and all, against the wall over and over again. We put her in an induced coma for almost three months because every time we tried to wean her off sedation & wake her up, she would revert back to her old erratic behavior. She was disoriented and confused, hallucinating, sometimes paranoid, sometimes violent, sometimes attempted to hurt herself, talked shit at her poor parents, did not recognize her own child, denied that she even had a child, it was such a mess. When she finally woke up & the inflammation calmed down, she had a 155-day memory gap and had dropped from 165lbs to 112lbs. It was her third time around having a flare-up of the disease, and because the NMDA receptor has a heavy role in controlling synaptic plasticity, it had affected her memory function and learning capacity such that she could no longer function as a normal working person on a day to day basis. She used to be a passionate teacher who wanted to build a school in her hometown in Guadalajara, and in her spare time gave free tutoring lessons to under-represented Hispanic students in the poorer part of town. Seeing how much of herself she lost to the disease broke my heart.

In short, what I’m trying to say is that Will would not have left that hospital for months (if at all, because you can easily die from this), and he would not have left with everything in his brain intact. That is why I decided not to use anti-NMDAR encephalitis as my diagnosis. Let's go with a treatable, predictable infection instead.

(2) Encephalitis is diagnosed first as an infection somewhere in the body, and then narrowed down through a battery of tests that may include an MRI. However, an MRI cannot confirm what kind of encephalitis it is. That requires a spinal tap, where we insert a needle into the spine to draw cerebrospinal fluid to send to the lab for tests. Those results are what will give us a confirmation of the specific type of encephalitis. (There are many types, with different levels of severity and varying methods of treatment. It’s a big umbrella.)

(3) As a rule, physicians cannot perform procedures and/or prescribe medications for their own loved
It is a breach of most hospitals’ protocol for an ICU attending to agree to take a patient who is not in the ICU. Hannibal is calling in favors for Will, and if I were him, I’d do the same thing. I want an ICU doctor taking care of my loved one any day.

Additionally, a **neurointensivist** is a doctor whose specialized training is a combination of neurology and intensive care, maybe a neurology residency and an intensive care fellowship or something like that. They usually run specialty neurosurgical or general neuro ICUs. They are not neurosurgeons, but neurosurgeons (for which the residency is a whopping seven years; I will be old by the time I’m done sob) undergo a period of training with the neurointensivists. When we graduate and become neurosurgeons on our own, we could become neurointensivists (but why, I mean, you trained as a surgeon for seven fucking years, use it) but usually the hospitals hire them to run the ICUs so we can focus on the surgeries. Our surgery schedules are often full and prevent us from being there during the day if the patient needs something; their presence helps so that we are only called for what really requires our attention. Their upside is that we have to run outpatient clinics and they don’t. They only take care of inpatients in the ICU; they work side by side with our teams to manage the patient’s needs.

**Meningoencephalitis** means that the inflammation includes the meninges, or membranes, that cover the brain and spinal cord. This is pretty invasive and can be fatal if not treated quickly. Thalamic and limbic involvements explain Will’s symptoms: disorientation, memory loss, seizures, behavioral anomalies, hallucinations, and disinhibition. Her loss of time can also be attributed to a temporal lobe focus, which would not be a surprise.

Treatment includes high-dose steroids to lower the inflammation, broad-spectrum high-dose IV antibiotics if it’s bacterial or antivirals if it’s viral (we will know this from the CSF samples), and symptom management such as Tylenol for the fevers, painkillers for the muscle aches, hydration, good food, rest, and low physical activity to encourage circulation & deter muscle loss during the course of the illness. If it’s autoimmune in nature like a lot of encephalitis cases, we can do a combination of immunosuppressants and plasmapheresis (take out the plasma from the blood through a dialysis machine and filter it to remove the antibodies attacking the brain).

**On Hannibal's more emotional nature**: I wanted to portray him as human and fallible, therefore all the more awesome and frightful in his cruelty and sadism. Too often it is easy to fall into the trap of painting him as some superhuman monster who just so happens to fall for a weak, fragile, pitiful Will, but there is more poetry to the juxtaposition and duality than there is in a homogenous Hannibal. A more human Hannibal who feels #emotions has to be more deliberate in his torture of people; indeed, he can only be so good at it because he knows how it hurts.

The part where Beverly asks about the Alana/Hannibal/Will triangle is deliberately not shown because I AM MEAN no’tt because it’s in the next chapter haha! Also this chapter marks the beginning of Act Two!

Only two songs for this chapter: the first one is Joep Beving's 432 (Prehension) and the second is Tchaikovsky's The Seasons Op. 37b: X. Octobre (Chant d'automne) as performed by Mikhail Pletnev. The [Spotify playlist](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37iwwxUQ4YBhNvA2dG47Tj) has them but you can also click on the links and it will take you to the Youtube playlist.

If you have any further questions not satisfied by the references, or want to nitpick the hints in the story with me, or just generally want to discuss this fascinating world of neurological disorders, hit the comment button below!
wow this chapter was so fucking hard to write also
no, Hannibal
that is not how this goes, Hannibal
you don't force women to have children with you liek that
stahp
no
horizon variations

Chapter by iluxia

Chapter Summary

In which there are transitions to be made and dogs to be distributed.

Chapter Notes

Here, have a breath of domestic life before shit gets real again! There's a lot of drama in this chapter, though. I actually have some of the next chapter already written, which I thought would be the last scene of this one, but it just didn't quite fit. You'll just have to wait until the next chapter for the dinner. Fun times!

The more observant readers might have noticed that I added this fic to a series and that there is now a finite number of chapters, which, yes, means that I have planned everything out until the end! There will be 25 chapters in Saturn Rising, which is just enough to bring the story to the conclusion of Arc III as we had envisioned. Arc IV will kick off a new fic altogether, the next in the series and with a completely different objective.

All in good time! For now, I hope you enjoy the domesticity below! It won't last long...

Will is reading beautiful, echoing words when the nurse comes in to tell her that she is being discharged. It takes a moment for her to understand, a moment the nurse uses to retrieve a blood pressure reading and a temperature.

"Let me just get one set of vitals," she says, "and then I'll help you get ready."

"Oh," Will is surprised. Hannibal's influence is considerable; she didn't expect discharge orders until at least the afternoon.

"Is there anything I can help you pack?"

"Oh, no, you don't need to do that," Will reassures her, wincing at the cuff now strangling her left arm. "My, uh, Hannibal can take care of it. I think he's already put stuff away..."

"Great! Your vitals look good, a little low-grade fever but nothing out of the expected. Let me help you get dressed and then I'll get your paperwork ready."

Hannibal, who had stepped out to fetch bottled water, returns with a smile. "I can help her get dressed, thank you."

"Oh! Alright, then. Let me get to the paperwork! I'm sure you'd much rather be out of here and back home as soon as possible."
"Yes, we would, thank you," Will vehemently agrees.

The young nurse flashes them both a grin before disappearing through the doors. Hannibal offers Will the bottled water with a self-satisfied smile. "We can be home in time for preparations for a proper dinner. Excellent."

Will laughs. "Is that what you're worried about?"

"Indulge me, darling." Hannibal puts away what few things of theirs are still on the bedside table: Will's phone, his tablet, his pen and paper, his book. "Are you finished with your reading? I can put your book away."

"For now, I suppose." Will surrenders the book, fingers sliding over the page. Hannibal has brought her an anthology of poetry, thoroughly enjoyed over the few quiet hours of the morning she has had to read it.

"Have you found something worth note?"

"O the mind, the mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.
I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
And I have asked to be
Where no storms come," she recites quietly.

Hannibal makes a soft sound of appreciation, eyes briefly sliding shut. "Perhaps when we are home, I shall persuade you to recite whole verses for me."

"Quid pro quo," she smiles up at him, "a verse for a verse."

He leans forward and steals a kiss like he is wont to do these days, leaving her skin crawling with prickles of heat. "A very fair exchange. We shall make it a tradition."

They're in the business of making traditions now, Will supposes. They are, after all, committed to make this last. The very thought makes her throat constrict, whether with happiness or fear she does not know. The only thing she does know is the depth and breadth of her want, now a force that moves her with urgency and strength the likes of which she has never experienced before. Maybe because she's been reading poetry, Eliot comes to mind, murmuring affirmations in her ear.

Desire itself is movement
Not in itself desirable;
Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement,
Timeless, and undesiring
Except in the aspect of time
Caught in the form of limitation
Between un-being and being.

Will sighs again, accepting Hannibal's helping hands as she is urged to step out of bed. This illness is giving her idle time, which in turn encourages maudlin thoughts. This is why she prefers to keep busy. After all, it only takes her a step and a half before the maudlin turns into morbid.

"If you feel strong enough for it, we can make a trip to Wolf Trap to get some of your things first. If not, I can go at a later time," Hannibal suggests, putting the overhead monitor on standby and then
unhooking her cardiac leads. He tries to do it underneath her hospital gown; Will snorts and just takes the whole thing off.

"I'm fine, I think," she says, ripping off the stickers on her chest without mercy. Hannibal hands her a bra. "You're driving, anyhow. Let's just get it done so that we won't have to leave home for the whole week."

"As you say."

The clothes are not hers, though they fit her perfectly. Hannibal must have purchased them with her in mind, more to lavish her with in his usual manner of encompassing provision. She can see how pleased he is to see her wearing them though, so she restrains her instinctive comments behind closed lips. *It wouldn’t hurt you to be grateful, Willow Graham. He just enjoys giving you things.*

She waits for the nurse before putting on the knitted sweater, because the IV is still in her forearm. At least Hannibal has respected her taste; the buttoned undershirt is a dark maroon, plain and without embellishments. She rolls up the sleeve and picks at the IV dressing with impatience. Would it bleed much if she just yanked it out? "We have to stop at a pharmacy to pick my meds up."

"Alan should have already called them into the pharmacy I specified. We can pick them up on the way back from Wolf Trap, along with some dog food."

Will laughs. "Nah, I have dog food at Wolf Trap."

Sara, the nurse, returns with papers to sign and instructions from the attending. Nothing that Hannibal doesn't already know, of course, but Will listens attentively anyway. Sara removes the IV with a deft hand (bleeding copiously after all, in the split second before gauze and pressure are applied) while explaining the necessity of logging Tylenol intake to avoid an overdose.

"Technically," she tells Will, "the advised maximum is 3 grams in 24 hours, but for someone with a relatively healthy liver like yours, 4 grams may be okay."

Will snorts, amused. "I'm quite certain all the whiskey I like to drink has blackened my liver beyond the point of what's considered healthy."

Sara wisely responds with, "I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

After the IV is removed and the discharge instructions are laid out, Will signs the papers with relief. Sara brings in a wheelchair, sees Will's expression, and promptly rescinds the offer.

"We can walk out together," Hannibal suggests instead, "since I know you must see us to the doors."

Sara nods brightly, and just like that, Will is released. Hannibal takes her hand with a soft smile.

"Shall we?"

"Let's."

The hospital's halls are a clean, sterile white, but once in a while there are art installations or recognition plaques to disrupt the monotony. There are even a few imposing portraits of old men and women (mostly men) in white coats, looming above the heads of passersby with the sombre, superior air of those privy to the myriad secrets of that grey, liminal space between life and death. Will marvels at the place, this foreign world that Hannibal inhabits whenever they are not together. "It's quieter than I expected," she notes.

"They made a point of making it quiet," Hannibal explains. "Anything to make it an environment conducive to healing. One of the main complaints patients and visitors had against the old building was the noise. Nevertheless, the executive board required the validity of several research studies
before they were convinced into picking a model for this new structure that would reduce cross-traffic and noise. The inefficiencies of bureaucracy are often tediously nonsensical, as you well know."

"Too well," Will remarks. They make a right turn and emerge into a large atrium which spans several floors above and below them; they are apparently on the fourth floor. Will leans over the railing and looks down at the first floor lobby below. "This is nice, though."


"Science behind each brick," Will smiles. "I get it, I get it."

Sara leaves them by the main elevators, where she waves a cheerful and sincere farewell. Will and Hannibal watch her briskly disappear down the same corridor in a moment of mutual silence, before Will remarks, "She must be happy to be rid of the VIP patient."

Hannibal shrugs. "Perhaps, perhaps not. She only had you as a patient; she will now be downgraded to a full patient load, three or four to one nurse."

"Oh. That sucks."

"Indeed. Now, the car is not parked with valet; I have a reserved lot near the ER exit. Let us go this way."

More hallways, an elevator ride, and three automatic doors later, they emerge in a familiar hallway Will remembers from her last visit. Her eye catches at a door which she recognizes to be Hannibal's office; through the slice of glass, she sees a snoring Yuriko curled up on the couch. The ER station buzzes ahead of them but Hannibal detours to a side corridor that exits into a small covered parking lot. There, protected from the thawing snow, sits Hannibal's black Bentley.

He unlocks the car for her and goes to stash the bags in the truck. Will slides into the passenger seat with much relief, reclining against the padded seat with a sigh. The door closes behind her to shut the world out.

Hannibal slides in and turns the ignition; the car quietly rumbles to life. The padded leather beneath her begins to warm. But before Hannibal can pull out of the lot, Will seizes his hand in a tight squeeze. "Thank you," she sighs.

Her eyes are closed but she can see his answering smile all the same. "You are welcome, mylimasis. Anything for you," he says, and she knows he means every word.

Judging by the state of the road leading up to her house, the interstate must have been difficult to drive; Will, however, slept through the whole two hours it took and didn't see for herself. Hannibal parks the car and reaches over to drape a scarf around her neck, appearing no more tired than he did when they left the hospital.

"What do you need me to help you with?" he asks, ever the gentleman.

"If you could go to the garage and turn off the water? It's the blue knob behind the white cabinet door on the left wall. The gas too. And then check that everything is locked. I'll go in and pack some clothes, some stuff for the dogs."
Together, they exit the homely warmth of the car for the frigid air outside. Will hunches against the brittle weather, looking up at the grey clouds which roll with the promise of more snow. Her breath steams before her face; best make this quick or else she’ll feel like shit tonight.

Her boots crunch through the snow, which she has to shake loose once she steps up to the porch. Hannibal has veered away towards the garage, seemingly unbothered by the cold. Unlocking the front door, she steps in, surveying the scene before her in the half-light.

CSI was here. She can tell. They must have checked the rooms when Georgia Madchen called from her landline. A shudder crawls up her spine; she could have died that night. Georgia's illness is much worse than hers and there is no telling if Will would have been capable of talking her down, or if there would have been an opportunity to even do so. Georgia could have slit her throat open in the dark without preamble.

Will's hand flies to clutch at her neck. Suddenly the house — her safehouse, her sailboat, her sanctuary — feels cold and foreign, now tainted with a death that could have been. This place is not safe anymore.

She climbs the stairs with slow, purposeful steps and begins packing her most vital belongings. Because she cannot shake the wrongness from her shoulders, the larger suitcase comes out, to be packed with her best clothes. She folds them well, packing as if she is leaving for good.

Is she leaving for good?

Maybe. The thought strikes her with some sadness, but the prospect of staying here fills her with more dread that she cannot fully account for.

She stuffs sweaters and jeans and jackets into the suitcase.

Only half of her closet deserves to come with her. The other half are old clothes, ratty items she should have gotten rid of long ago. She cleans out her bathroom, taking toiletries and makeup; she packs the shoes separately in a vinyl duffel bag. And then there is the box of keepsakes from her parents and Mrs. Bradley. The fireproof container with her passport and licenses, diplomas and property titles, social security cards and vehicle registrations. What else? She hauls the bags downstairs and looks around.

Laptop, tablet, a folder of papers for work. A few precious volumes and Mrs. Bradley's recipe book from the kitchen. The dogs' things go into another duffel bag, separate from everything else. Her favorite blanket from the couch, the thick one with faux fur in deep and vibrant garnet. That brings it to a total of four bags.

Well, she thinks, I've packed my life into less.

Hannibal comes in from outside and sees the bags lined up; he raises an expressive eyebrow.

"I figured I might as well start moving," Will shrugs. "D'you think it'll fit?"

"We can drop the back seats forward to make more space," Hannibal nods. "And let's not forget the dog food, because I have nothing appropriate to feed your dogs."

Will goes to fetch that while Hannibal begins loading the car. On a whim, as she passes them by, Will throws in a handful of her vinyls into a bag to take along as well. She'll go stir-crazy if all there is to listen to at Hannibal's house is opera.

A deep pang of melancholy pierces through her chest as they drive away. Slowly but surely, her
house shrinks in the distance, circled with the bare skyward branches of dead trees. Her whole life is changing. She can feel it as sure as if it were seawater shifting beneath the hull of her boat.

There is nothing else to do but to relinquish herself to the tides. Will reclines in her seat and closes her eyes: this is where she ends and they begin.

If this was lost, let us be lost always.

( Mary Oliver )

In Hannibal's house, there are many rooms. It sits there, in its quaint little corner of Baltimore, still and waiting for its inhabitants to arrive. Perhaps she means it more ways than one; this house is made for a family, large enough for two adults and two or three children, certainly able to accommodate a dog or two. With just the two of them there, the rooms on the ground floor are almost too big.

Will pushes her face into Winston's fur, sprawling on the floor in the living room to greet the dogs. Hannibal refuses to let her help with the luggage so she busies herself with letting the dogs outside, setting their bowls up and giving them food. The backyard garden is small but well-tended and will be quite beautiful come spring, Will can already tell.

When she returns with seven clean dogs (she brought their towels too, for good measure), Hannibal is making something gingery in the kitchen.

"Your bags are still in the hallway, since I did not know which goes where," Hannibal tells her. "Why don't you take a shower and lie down for a while? You need the rest, mylimasis."

"As you say, Dr. Lecter," Will smiles. She does feel worn thin from the cold outside. A shower sounds divine. "Where is a good place for the dogs' things?"

He directs her to an unused cupboard in the living room, near the glass doors leading out back. There are empty shelves for their playthings, their bags of food, their unused towels, and all sundry accessories for their grooming needs. She thanks him with a smile. "I know it's a lot. I'm finding most of them homes and will probably keep two. I'm afraid that's the least amount of dogs I can tolerate though, so if you want me, you'll be stuck with a few."

He chuckles, pressing a kiss into the crown of her head. "A deal I am more than willing to make if it means I get to keep you." That he is willing to compromise for her thrills her beyond words.

He returns to the kitchen and she to her task. Two of the bags with sundry items go to the second floor study for later sorting, but the large suitcase goes to the master suite with her.

Is it presumptuous of her to just walk in here? She's slept here before, but always as a guest for a day or two, never for more than a week. Perhaps she should just take a guest room instead? But she has a feeling that Hannibal would be upset if she did. Frowning, Will pushes aside the awkwardness of intruding into another person's private space and begins unpacking her things.

It really isn't that bad. Intimidating at first, but the aesthetic is very Hannibal. She must ask for the story behind the suit of samurai armor by the door. Everything here bears direct significance to him. Everything here is a discovery.
The dressing room is enormous; whatever concerns she had about space are immediately put to rest. There are, in fact, shelves and dressers and drawers and closets ready for her. The new vanity must be for her as well; it wasn't there the last time she was here. Fresh towels are hung and waiting for her in the bathroom beside the ones that are obviously his; there is even a hand towel sitting by the second sink, folded into the shape of a rose. She reads all the signs with ease and clarity: he has taken the time to carve out a Will-shaped space in his life. He wants her here.

Will sits down on top of the lidded toilet and bites her fist. For a moment, she closes her eyes and just breathes. She shouldn't be crying. There is no reason to cry.

White marble chills her bare feet when she removes her socks. There is a separate hamper set out for her laundry too. It takes only a little while to put away her things, and before long she is stepping into the shower, a luxurious rectangle of marble and glass with a wide rainfall showerhead and water that heats up in under a minute. There are toiletries waiting for her also, engulfing her in scents of vetiver and warm cedarwood. Hannibal has thought of everything.

With care, she scrubs the scum from her body and washes between her legs, resolutely not thinking about the one thing she has lost even as she stands to gain so much. There will be time later. For now, she needs to let it sit in silence.

The next thing she remembers is the give of the pillow beneath her warm cheek. She must be drooling; her mouth is open and her lips paper-dry. A large hand strokes up and down her flank, coaxing her towards wakefulness, which she doesn't realize she has left. Hannibal is saying something. The words take a moment to make sense.

"...need to wake up and at least put some soup in your stomach, mylimasis," he tells her. "I know you are tired, but... not good for your condition to be dehydrated, which you... just a little now, and you can go back to sleep."

Odd. Sounds ebb and flow like tides rushing in and out of shore. Air vibrates on its way out of her hot lungs. Her limbs are stiff, numb, and heavy.

"M'awake," she murmurs, blinking and turning her face into the pillow. "M'awake."

Hannibal only continues stroking her flank.

Eventually, she turns over, which leaves her a little winded, and manages to sit up with his help. Pillows behind her back, more pillows to prop her straight, and then he deems her ready for some sustenance.

"I feel like shit," Will croaks, throat now unused to producing sound. How long has she been asleep? "What time is it?"

"Ten at night. Our little trip to your house taxed you more than expected. Here, just a taste," he brings a spoon to her mouth, full of something with gingery hot spices. The broth heats her tongue and sinks into her throat with blessed warmth. She makes a sound of delight. "This recipe is good for such times as these when the body needs some warmth, vitamins, and plenty of electrolytes. This should replenish you enough and you shouldn't need to move until tomorrow unless you wish to."

She grunts, opening her mouth for another spoonful. Her arm clumsily goes for the food Hannibal
has set on a tray, but he hushes and tucks her back down, bringing the next sip to her lips instead. Peripherally, she thinks about how he must enjoy this, having her so completely at his mercy.

In a warm, tired silence, Hannibal feeds her the whole bowl. There is chicken in it, but her brain is too blank to register what spices she is tasting, only that they are there and it is good. Then again, anything Hannibal makes is good.

"Thank you," Will sighs, sinking into the pillow fort around her as he puts the tray aside. "It was good. I'm sorry I'm not better company. I left you to eat dinner alone." In any other circumstance, being a guest in his house and skipping on dinner prepared for her would have been unconscionably rude, but she hopes he can forgive her given her condition.

Hannibal snakes a palm to cup the curve of her jaw, perhaps feeling at her neck for a fever. "Such unnecessary concerns you have. You may discard them now that you are my responsibility. I want you to think only of your wellbeing from now on."

Will knows he means this in more ways than one. Instead of responding, she simply turns her head to press a blind kiss on the inside of his wrist.

"Let me attend to a few things and then I shall be back to bed with you. Will you be alright for a moment?"

Will nods. He leaves with the tray, but only after making her drink a very tall glass of lemon water.

Strange how time passes when one is ill. She is only aware of her own tired breathing and the muted hum of the centralized heating somewhere above her head. The sound comes from within the walls. Mutinously, she refuses to allow her brain to think about what things she has found within walls in her line of work.

A weight bears down on her arms when she closes her eyes. A warm weight with a particular shape. *It's the shape of a child,* she realizes, and at once the image of a round-faced, pale-haired baby materializes before her.

With trembling fingers, Will traces its cheek, its plump little lips, the turn of its nose. What delicate skin she has. What fine hair and shapely little ears. Would she have called Will mama? Would she have loved Will the way Will loves her? Will wants to hear her babble and cry.

Will wants.

Shakily, she brings her hands up to her face and forces the illusion away. It is stubborn; it clings to her vision, lingering even after she opens her eyes again. It requires all of her to shut it down before she starts shutting down instead.

Hannibal returns shortly, taking a few minutes for his nightly routine in the bathroom before emerging, half-naked, to slip into bed next to Will. She is still shaken from her vision; her breathing is disordered, her countenance destroyed. He must notice. He says nothing.

Will goes to him willingly, molding their bodies together the way he wants it. They curl and tangle underneath the coverlet, foreheads finally resting together as they breathe each other's air. "Recite some poetry for me? I can't quiet my head."

He hums, considers, and then starts.

"Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind
But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know."

Who knows? Certainly neither of them. Perhaps the child would have been born in another life.
Perhaps they are never meant to have children. Perhaps, perhaps—all these thoughts are mere possibilities now past their period of realisation. Will can only allow these shimmering possibilities to sink and diminish into the darkness; she has to let them go.

In the morning, the world seems brighter. That, or Will simply doesn't know how to feel about the world — unsurprising, what with her brain quite literally on fire.

Hannibal wakes her to shower, a quiet indulgence they share as the sun rises beyond the clouds. Will finds that she has no awareness of time underneath the influence of this illness, but here, time does not matter as much as space.

Space matters more. The space between her heartbeats, marching along as Hannibal counts them in the morning to record in a book. The space he has made for her dogs downstairs, all seven of them, while she slept. The space he has prepared in his study, where a second mahogany desk now awaits her, looking across the room from his own. It is a space for her to do her work in this house which is his but will soon be theirs. Space matters now more than ever as she watches it diminish between the interface of their two merging lives.

"When did you pick up my medicines?" Will asks as she goes about slicing portabella mushrooms at Hannibal's behest.

"On our way over from Wolf Trap yesterday, do you not recall? Hmm, you were deeply asleep on the drive back. The butter, please," he explains, meanwhile pressing his fingertips to the skillet newly introduced to the fire. Satisfied with its heat, he pours in the eggs, which were first separated, yolk from white, beaten, and then recombed in a bowl with a spatula. A morning scramble with mushrooms, potatoes, and pancetta, hearty enough to help her stomach digest her morning medicines without upset.

"What will we do today?" she asks this time, quieter and more uncertain.

"Whatever you like," Hannibal smiles indulgently. "We may take the dogs on a walk if you feel
strong enough, or we may stay indoors. We may do a number of things together while we are here: read, cook, play music... I can teach you the theremin, it is quite engaging in its singularity. Or, if you will allow me, I should like to draw you."

Will doesn't even try to fight the flush that creeps up her neck. Nevertheless, she resolutely insists, "I want to do what you usually do in your spare time. I know you don't have a lot."

Just for a moment, a pregnant silent takes over the space between them. Hannibal wears his amusement plain for Will to see, but Will cannot fathom just what it is about her statement that amuses him so.

"I am rather boring, you might find. I have my hobbies," he confesses, "but they are quiet, solitary pursuits best done in the depths of the night. That is often when I find 'spare time,' insofar as this time being separate from time I spend on work or chores. Although I am of the persuasion that life gives us no time to spare, not really. People simply become occupied with the tasks of living that time, in their outlook, becomes either used or spared. It is a matter of perspective."

Will quietly slices the fresh tomatoes, their red juices staining the chopping board. "If you don't want to do things together, that's fine too."

"Of course I do, mylimasis, you misunderstand," he sighs with a softer note of regard. "I simply do not want to disillusion you into the reality that your companion here is merely one dull old eccentric."

Will has to laugh at that— "Dull old eccentric? Hannibal, you're not that much older than me, and you are most certainly the farthest thing from dull. In fact, the word shouldn't even be associated with you in a sentence!"

He laughs along at her words, surely noting that she left eccentric behind. Well, if he tries to protest, Will can use the skull-and-roses dining table decor as corroborating evidence.

"Let's walk the dogs," she then decides, "after breakfast, if that works for you. And then maybe we can enjoy some music. I'd like to hear you play your harpsichord."

"It would be my distinct pleasure, my dear."

Breakfast is shared in the dining room, drapes drawn open to let the wan light illuminate their hushed conversation. Half of what they say to each other is communicated through touch and gaze and the warmth of their shared space. Will pretends not to notice when Hannibal slips Lila a strip of bacon and a small chunk of sausage. Thereafter they tidy their plates and bundle up for the walk outside, Hannibal insisting she wear more layers than is strictly appropriate.

"I can barely move," she laughs, holding her arms out to mimic a fat penguin. She certainly waddles like one.

"Only to ensure you can't run away from me," he tells her, as if Will has anywhere else to go.

Outside is a snowy dreamscape, fat snowflakes falling thickly from the sky in a slow, waltzing flutter. Several of them decide to settle upon her face when she looks up; they melt on her cheeks and weigh down her eyelashes but they also bring a smile.

The dogs are ecstatic, of course. Once at the nearby fenced park, they gambol away the second the leases are let loose. They chase each other in groups of threes and fours, the larger dogs slamming face-first into the waist-high snowbanks lining the sidewalk and spilling over the benches. A few cars pass by, but few pedestrians are out in this cold. They are isolated enough for her to pretend as
though they are the only ones left in this world. It isn't such a daunting thought anymore.

Hannibal removes his glove and swipes a cold thumb across Will's eye, smudging a snowflake into cold moisture. She can feel it glisten on her eyelid.

"Don't get your precious surgeon fingers frostbitten, doctor."

"This isn't anywhere as cold as Lithuania," Hannibal dismisses quietly, not for one second looking away from her face. "Back home, it was cold enough that the snow did not melt even when we touched it with bare hands."

"Did you make snowmen?"

"Snow bears," Hannibal recalls with a ghost of a smile in his garnet eyes. "My little sister preferred them over snowmen."

"Was she not afraid of bears?"

"Men brought more to fear than animals where we grew up."

Will blinks away visions of grim, grey mountains towering behind an ancient manor with crumbling stone walls. "I never knew snow as a child," she confesses. "It was a thing I knew to name but not to touch."

"Did you want snow?"

"Can one want something of which's existence they cannot even comprehend?"

"Yes," he answers, begetting her curious gaze, "although often without one realizing."

"You speak from experience."

"A recent one," he confesses, head dipping closer. "I had never thought to want a child before we lost ours."

It's the cold that steals her breath, she could say, but she'd be lying. She struggles to meet his eyes, fearing recrimination there, but all she sees is a molten, roiling sorrow of a depth that surprises both of them.

"I've dreamt of her," Will confesses in turn, caught in his limpid gaze, her words turning into small white clouds of heat from her lips. "I held her in my arms. She had hair like yours."

"And eyes like yours," Hannibal concurs, once again stroking under her eye with a thumb. "She would have been a wonder. She would have been my treasure."

At his words, Will's breath trembles in her chest, expression spasming into one of sudden grief; she steps forward and hides in his arms, forehead pressing into his collarbone, tears disappearing into his coat. Maybe it's the illness. Maybe she only feels so strongly of grief because her brain is on fire. Hannibal curls an arm around her back and cups a large hand behind her head, cradling her as they stand there in the snow, alone together and away from the rest of the world.

It still hurts, but loss is easier to bear when shared between two.
“So do I buy the large or the extra large?” Bev asks, “Because I don't want them to starve, that'd be cruel. Also, I'm thinking of getting a food dispenser. You know, for when we're stuck at work and I can't get home in time.”

Will snorts, shifting the phone against her ear as she holds Georgie still for combing. "Don't bankrupt yourself, they'll survive a few hours without food as long as there's water. Cooper and Mango are both fairly small, they won't eat that much. Just get the large."

"Right-o." There is some rustling and grunting on the other side, presumably Beverly hauling the large bag of dog food into her cart. "What else will I need?"

"I'll give you their toys so you won't need any," Will smiles. "A small brush and dog shampoo. Maybe a nail file; I don't suggest clipping their nails yourself if you're not comfortable. The groomers can do that."

Bev interrupts with a noise best described as a strangled squeal. "Oh my god, wait, I found the doggie toothbrushes! Will they let me brush their teeth?"

Will laughs. "Cooper, maybe, but not Mango. She'll gnaw that thing into pieces."

"God, there's so many kinds," Bev wonders. "This shit's an industry, girl. I can't believe people came up with all of this crap and then spent time to make it all."

"People will always come up with ways to make money. Oh, don't buy leashes, they already have fitted ones, the kind that's a body harness; it's better for walking them." Georgie wriggles free of her clutches after a few minutes, trotting over to where Dee and Mango are chewing on a toy. Will clicks her tongue and Winston comes over, obediently sitting at her feet and submitting to her ministrations. He's a smart boy; no wonder Hannibal likes him.

"So I'm taking two of them, where are the others gonna go?” Bev asks.

"Alana's taking Georgie and Buster. My dog sitter is taking Dee. You're taking Mango and Cooper, so that leaves me with Winston and Lila."

"Dr. Debonair okay with that?"

"He might deny it but he likes them," Will chuckles, glancing up towards the kitchen from where enticing aromas are wafting. Dinner will be ready soon. "Speaking of the devil—"

"—a gorgeous devil—"

"—stop hitting on my man, Bev, or I'll tell him to rescind his dinner invitation," Will laughingly threatens.

"Dinner?!" Beverly shrieks, surely starting other people in the pet store.

"Sometime next week, he says, just let us know when you're available."

"Unless a new case pops up, the weekend should be fine! Oh man, I'm stoked! You should know that my expectations are sky-high after all that you've told me!"

"Come hungry," Will tells her, "and expect a Michelin-star dinner."

"I will starve myself all day," Beverly vows. "What's appropriate to bring? Wine? Or should I play it
safe and bring something I actually know enough of, like beer? Do I dress up?"

"It's just us, Ariadne, and his resident, but it wouldn't hurt to dress nicely. Beer is fine, I think. He'll appreciate whatever you bring."

"I'm so excited!" she all but yells, making Will wince a little. She should have used the loudspeaker. "Hopefully by then you'll look less like death warmed over. After a whole two weeks of Dr. Debonair's hot lovin', you—"

"—will be toasting your ass if you don't stop," Will warns again, injecting a bit more venom into her tone this time, though it fools Beverly not a whit. "Don't think I won't jack with your coffee in the break room, I am not above petty means."

"Leave my beans alone, barbarian! Just because you drink that instant swill—"

"—you drank that swill too—"

"—I was tired enough not to remember what it tasted like! After 26 hours awake, all that matters is the caffeine, dude, my taste buds by then are dead!"

"Then I'll tell Hannibal to take off the tiramisu from his menu," Will smirks now, revealing her ultimate weapon, "have it replaced by something without coffee."

Beverly audibly gasps. "You wouldn't." Will allows her silence to speak for itself. "Fine, fine! I won't tease you anymore for today, I'll leave you alone with your dogs, you miserable hermit, you! Threatening my caffeine intake... why am I even friends with you again?"

Will only laughs, because she doesn't know the answer.

"Oh—it's me. Gotta go, girl, talk to you later. I'll text you when I'm free, let me know if anything changes! Ta!"

"Alright, bye," Will sighs, smiling even as Beverly abruptly hangs up. Must have been her turn to check out. Will puts the phone down and pulls Cooper up on the couch, relishing the lingering warmth from her friend's voice. She's lucky Beverly is able to take two of her dogs, which means she will still get to see them; overall, she's lucky to have Beverly at all, because Will didn't realize how much she was missing the friendship Alana had provided until it was gone.

The thought sober her a little, dimming the edges of her smile. Maybe someday in the future we'll be friends again, she thinks, though it sounds wishful to her ears. She has to call Alana about the dogs at some point, but the thought of having her come over makes Will's gut clench. Jealousy, for sure. Apprehension too. But it has to be done. The dogs deserve a good home.

Inhaling, she straightens and picks up her phone.

“You look quite beleaguered,” Hannibal notes as they sit down for dinner. Dark red roses and bone-white twigs decorate the candles which serve as their centerpiece for the night. No electric lights in the room; they are suspended in a bubble of soft candlelight. “What seems to be the matter?”

“I spoke with Alana about the dogs,” Will grimaces, spreading her napkin upon her lap. “She still isn’t too pleased about, you know, all this.”
"I don’t suspect she will be for some time," Hannibal remarks. "She will take a while to get used to the idea. She has never been one to surrender her own moral standards; it is a point of pride."

Will snorts. "Morality is so overrated that it didn’t even land on Maslow’s hierarchy."

Hannibal’s eyes narrow in his quiet expression of mirth. "You might not want to let her hear that." Notably, he does not disagree.

She relays Beverly's availability in the coming week and they plan for a Saturday dinner, during which Beverly will take Cooper and Mango from their care. Alana might come in two days, Will tells Hannibal, and the dog sitter can stop by next week.

"Don't feel as though you have to send every one of them off immediately, my darling," Hannibal assures her. "I truly do not mind their presence as much as you think."

"Oh, I know you like Lila and Winston just fine," Will airily responds, "don't think I don't see you slipping them treats when I'm not looking."

"Lila is exceedingly well-behaved," he sniffs, "and Winston is a smart dog. They have done nothing to earn my disregard."

Will can only laugh, glad that Hannibal is at least accepting of such an integral part of her life. She doesn't know what she would do without the comfort of at least a few dogs; her sanity would crumble. Who would she spend time with when the humans became too much? Her head is too dark a place to be in alone.

Hannibal helps her settle the dogs that night and even allows Winston into the master bedroom so that she may have some company while he finishes some paperwork in his study. Something about a conference where he is expected to give a lecture. He tucks her in, pressing a kiss to her forehead after recording her vital signs. Her dreams are feather-light and intangible; she only wakes once and finds herself cradled in his arms with nowhere but sleep to go.

The next two days are not as easy. She wakes drenched in sweat each morning, breaking low-grade fevers and feeling how much it taxes her system. If it weren't for Hannibal keeping up with her meals and medications, she would surely be back in the hospital with acute dehydration.

He has generously offered plenty of options for indoor recreation, but Will often lacks the energy to pull through, instead retiring to the couch in his study or the bed if the headaches get bad. One notable afternoon, she wakes ensconced in a sofa in the living room, having fallen asleep underneath the spread of her blanket and the lull of his music. Except when she wakes, he is no longer at the piano; he sits sketching her instead.

"You might have to take artistic liberties," Will tells him, bleary-eyed and only halfway coherent. "I must look like shit."

"You will see," Hannibal hums, pencil stroking away. "You make a beautiful study in light and shadow."

"Chiaroscuro," she sighs, closing her eyes once again. She sits under a wash of white sunlight streaming through a window covered in thawing frost. "I had a case in L.A. once, so on an odd
afternoon I went to the county museum for some peace and quiet. Georges de la Tour's *La Madeleine à la veilleuse*, do you know it? (1) Traveled all the way from the Louvre for a special exhibit; I was lucky. The Lady Magdalene was sitting there, facing the light, contemplating something far greater than human comprehension. A skull on her knee, turned towards the viewer, as if to question us, to warn us: do you have what it takes? Her divinity comes after sacrifice. Golgotha is a place of death, after all. The death of luxury and vanity; the death of the self."

"And yet she is made more beautiful by her trials, her repentance," Hannibal continues the vein of her thoughts. "She had quite a cult, the Lady Magdalene. They admired her asceticism and restraint as a true reflection of her spiritual devotion."

Will hums. "I remember watching her for a long time as she watched that burning flame. I believe they call it tenebrism; the artist's technique was masterful. Isolating her in a circle of light, pulling us in and silencing us so that we can hear only the melancholy of her thoughts. No narrative needed in the picture; just her with her thoughts, suspended in space and time. All of this conveyed with the gradation of light and shadow. It makes me wonder what you can convey through me."

"To portray you, this medium is paltry and insufficient," Hannibal inhales, tone grave.

"So what medium would you use?"

"What medium can convey your corporeality but life itself?"

"I don't feel very corporeal right now," Will chuckles weakly. But Hannibal continues, "Or perhaps death; nothing else would suffice. For how else does one pay tribute to the light except by way of darkness?"

"Dramatic illumination," Will smiles, eyes still closed.

"Chiaroscuro."

"We should visit a museum again," she says dreamily, fading even as her headache begins to mount. "I should like to hear your analyses in real time."

"We will, my darling. Anytime you like."

His voice and the sound of pencil on paper accompany her into the shadows of her subconscious. It is the last thing she remembers for a while.

Several days later, maybe Wednesday or Thursday Will doesn't know, Alana comes by to take Georgie and Buster home. Will would like to say that she is engaged and prepared for the encounter, but instead she is laid out in the study when Alana walks in.

"Oh," Will blinks, levering herself up and making herself dizzy in the process. At least she's wearing actual clothes instead of pajamas, or worse yet, one of Hannibal's shirts. "Hi, Alana. Sorry I didn't hear you ring the door." Alana's tense countenance softens at once; Will must truly look a fright. "That bad, huh?"

"No, no, you just look tired." Trying to make her sound better than she is, as usual. It's reassuring to see that Alana's techniques with her don't change. "Good morning, Will. I'm glad to see you out of the hospital, at least."
She sits down beside Will on the couch, hand reaching to pet Winston. Hannibal remains by the door.

"Perhaps a coffee, Alana?" he offers, ever the gracious host. "Will, darling, I can bring more tea, if you'd like some more."

"Please," says Will.

"Thank you," Alana nods, not quite meeting Hannibal's eyes. He leaves the room but neither of them breathes easier, Will easily able to read Alana's old history within these walls. Something within her chafes.

“How are you feeling?” Alana asks. “Any better?”

“I hallucinate a lot less, if that’s what you mean.” Alana gives her a look; Will sighs. “Better, yes. Clearer. I haven’t lost time again.”

“Good,” Alana says, though with a frown. “Fevers?”

“Every night except the first night but they’re trending down. Hannibal thinks the antivirals are kicking in. I hate the steroids, they make me anxious.”

“That’s a common side effect.”

“So he tells me. Doesn’t make it feel any better.”

Alana smiles. “I’m glad you have someone to watch over you, Will. Since you won’t take care of yourself.”

“Ouch.”

“True,” Alana shrugs, “and you have never been one for pretty lies. You work yourself too hard, and while I admire your dedication, there is such a thing as too much.”

“Trust me, I’ve heard this spiel many times by now. You and Hannibal sound exactly alike.”

“We were friends for some time,” Alana sighs this time, sagging against the couch and tucking a leg underneath her. Georgie comes forward and puts her head on Alana’s knee. Here we go, thinks Will. “I was once one of the closest in his circle. I still don’t fully understand what went wrong but the last time we spoke with each other, it was—an unpleasant exchange,” Alana picks her words with careful prejudice. “Though he’s likely already told you this.”

“Some,” Will noncommittally shrugs. “I don’t pry.”

“You mean you don’t need to pry?” Alana shoots her a wry smile. “You can probably read novels from us.”

“A tragedy. He respects you a lot.”

“And I him,” Alana sighs again. For a heartbeat she holds her words back, and then, eyes still trained down, “I’m glad you make each other so happy. I know that for a long time he thought he would never find anyone, and I know that to an extent you thought the same. It’s nice to see those presumptions proven wrong. At least I know that he can be wrong.”

Will snorts at that. “Not very often, mind. I lord it over him whenever it happens.”
Alana has to chuckle. “Gotta keep him on his toes, after all.”

“Right,” Will smiles back, for a moment regaining the comfortable rapport they shared when they could call each other close friends. “Thanks for doing this, by the way. I know it’s not easy having so many dogs, what with your schedule.”

“It’ll be motivation to work less and come home,” Alana shrugs. “I love Buster anyhow and Georgie’s a darling. I’ve felt bad leaving Applesauce by himself for so long, he’s always so lonely. It can’t be good for him.”

“It isn’t. They’re like people too; they get depressed.”

Winston huffs at their feet, as if to agree. Buster is nosing at his tennis ball in the corner; Lila is nowhere to be seen. Probably went after Hannibal into the kitchen, like she is wont to do these days. If Hannibal wants her to stay out of there, he’ll have to start training her soon, or it’ll be too late.

“So,” Alana clears her throat, now having pulled Mango into her lap, “I see the ring. Do you have a date?”

The ring? Oh, *this* ring. Will’s been wearing it on her finger instead of her neck since she is mostly indoors, but it has so thoroughly become part of her body that it has all but turned invisible to her own eyes. Brought to the forefront of attention, Will begins fiddling with it, eyeing the alexandrite glittering against her pale skin.

“No date yet,” Will chooses to be honest, “I think he wants to wait until this encephalitis tides over. We’d have to request leave too, and that’s its own beast at Quantico.”

“Am I invited?” Alana quietly asks, and at that, Will has to look up with a severe frown.

“Of course you are, Alana, I wouldn’t leave you out of something that big.” And then, because it needs to be said, “Whatever disagreements we might have had in the past about my fitness for work or your conflicts of interest, I still think of you as a close friend.”

“Well, that’s—that’s good,” Alana nods, a flush spreading across her cheeks. She is equal parts pleased and relieved. “I still consider you a very good friend too, Will.”

A thick, warm silence settles between them for a while, during which Will feels as though they’ve just stumbled over a difficult hurdle with far fewer wounds than expected. Maybe optimism does pay off sometimes. After what must be a few minutes, Hannibal walks into the room with a tray of snacks and drinks, Lila trotting along at his heels. Figures. That dog has never looked up at Will with such pure adoration, even when Will takes time to remove dingleberries and burrs from her fur; talk about playing favorites.

“I hope I am not interrupting,” Hannibal excuses himself, setting the tray on the table before them. Alana straightens beside Will, visibly more nervous in his presence. “Alana, this pour-over is of those beans you preferred from Papua New Guinea. I was fortunate enough to procure some high-grade Colombian chocolate if you would like to add some flavor.”

No one who knows Hannibal ever refuses his gastronomic creations; Alana eagerly partakes. Will almost gets the impression that Alana is willing to endure their tension-fraught history if only for a seat at Hannibal’s table. Will can’t blame her; the food is divine.

“Will, darling, your tea,” he pours her a cup of that sweet-smelling jasmine blend, the one that soothes Will into an easy sleep. She’s still not convinced that he doesn’t lace it with some sort of sedative. He turns to Alana, though, and says, “I trust that you are satisfied of Will’s improving
health?"

Alana opens her mouth to say one thing, appears to reconsider, and then shakes her head. “Yes, quite. I’m glad she’s getting better. I’m glad you’re both happy. I told her as much.”

Something warms in Hannibal’s countenance, a note of their shared past slipping through his routinely impeccable mask. “Perhaps optimism does pay off sometimes.”

Will very nearly snorts her tea, laughing at the parallels. What else can she do, in the face of Hannibal’s clairvoyance? If not laughter, it’d be doubt, leading to despair.

“Do share the punch line,” Hannibal prompts, lips lifting into a small smile.

Shaking her head, Will puts down her teacup before she drops it. “It’s funny; five minutes ago, I just thought the same thing.”

“Of optimism?” Alana blinks, falling behind.

“It’s a novel outlook, what can I say.”

But the soft warmth has evaporated now, as Alana reawakens to the fact of her intrusion. She is the third wheel; she will never be able to catch up.

Later, after Alana has left and they have resettled, Hannibal wants to hear of their conversation. Will recounts it and allows him to bring it to life with his formidable imagination; she then wonders aloud what he can read in the space between them, what he thinks of Alana’s intent.

“She genuinely desires to rekindle both friendships: ours and yours,” Hannibal answers. “However, the nature of this relationship is making it difficult for her jealous heart.”

Nevertheless, Will ends up inviting Alana to dinner anyway. She asks Hannibal about it and he is open to the idea, confessing that he has missed Alana’s palate amongst his guests, although it never became enough of a reason to approach her once again and reopen doors long shut.

“She resented my transition back into surgery; she regarded me as a mentor and my presence in her life heavily weighted her decision towards choosing psychiatry for herself. Seeing me leave the specialty to return to surgery felt like a betrayal. It’s not difficult to understand; I shoulder some of the fault too. I did nothing to discourage her regard.”

“But you can’t stand people who push their own agenda into your life,” Will chuckles, “because that’s just rude.”

Hannibal leans over, placing a soft kiss upon her cheekbone. “Your insight is frightfully accurate, my dear.”

“It’s my party trick, I’ve got to keep it sharp,” Will points out. “So six people for Saturday instead of five. Will that be alright?”

“For certain,” he assures her. “I will be leaving early in the morning for the market but should return by midday. Plenty of time for preparations.”

“I’ll help.”
“Only if you feel well enough to do so, darling, I don’t want you overtaxing yourself and undoing our good work.” And then, as if seeing through to her very core, he asks, “Will you truly be alright with Alana present for company?”

Will turns her face into his chest and sighs. “I know it will never be the same, not after she’s been my psychiatrist and everything that’s happened in between, but I don’t want to lose her as a friend. Do you think I’m asking for too much?”

He remains silent for a while, considering a response.

“Sometimes,” he says, “in order to create a connection, we must sever one in its stead.”

“Shall I take that to mean that you and Alana are incompatible entities in my life?”

“Certainly not,” Hannibal frowns, “for I am more than willing to reopen old doors with her if she is similarly willing. However, I do not think that she and you will be able to regain what rapport you used to enjoy; all the same, I will never be to her what I once was before I met you. It is simply impossible. You are my betrothed, the core of my affection. Your presence removes doors that were once open to Alana.”

Put that way, it’s quite easy to understand. Theirs is a complicated triangle, but it is underlined by a simple motivation.

“I thought of her as a potential relationship too, you know. Long ago, long before I met you.” Will plays with Hannibal’s fingers in her hands, tracing the calluses on his forefinger and ring finger and thumb. “She must have known you then; I could tell she wouldn’t be receptive. Even then, I tried approaching, and just as I thought, she kindly turned me away; she had thought about it too, but at the time, I wasn’t worth it for her. She had her eye on someone else.” She had her eye on you.

“Her loss,” he hums, “my gain.” His arm tightens around her shoulders.

“It just hurts to think of the friendship we both lose in her,” Will sighs again, “because I do genuinely like her as a person.”

“She is an exceptional individual, beyond a doubt, and a worthy friend, I do agree. There are very few of her kind in the world. Unfortunately, we must both let her go.” Hannibal pauses for a moment, thinking as he gazes into the fire, before asking Will: “Would you rather love the more and suffer the more, or love the less and suffer the less? That is, I think, the only real question, for everything worth having in life is achievable only after sacrifice.”

Will thinks of her decaying bond with Alana. It cost her years to build that bond, time and effort, thought, consideration. Long walks debating the finer points of behavioral linguistics; awkward nights out when Alana would insist. Gifts painstakingly chosen in spite of Will’s own lacking taste. Disappointments buried and forgotten for the sake of keeping the peace.

But when weighed against what she now has instead… well, it’s all a matter of adjustment. After all, her horizons are changing. She looks up at Hannibal and says the only response: “If it’s a choice you can consciously make, Hannibal, then it isn’t love. If we had the choice, then there would be such a question, but we don’t. Who can control when and how much they love? If you can control it, is it still love?”

Hannibal does not answer, but there was never any need.
REFERENCES

(1) George de la Tour’s *La Madeleine à la veilleuse* was painted in 1640 and is considered a beautiful example of chiaroscuro and tenebrism. The themes explored in the image (melancholy, vanity, death, and light) were popular amongst the artists of the time, particularly of the Italian and Dutch schools of art. The skull on her knee is a symbol of Golgotha (Calvary) and the bloody scourge on the table symbolizes her repentance, but the intensely private gaze she trains on the flame is softer than more dramatic representations of atonement often seen from the artists of this time. I saw this piece at the Louvre two years ago and was fascinated. I particularly love de la Tour’s art for the way it depicts candlelight; if you can imagine it, the candlelit dinner scene in this chapter would have had the same atmosphere as his paintings do, with the characters’ faces turned towards the light but the rest of them falling softly into shadow. This version of La Madeleine is currently exhibited at the LA County Museum of Art.

(2) Four songs for this chapter: *Letters of a Traveler* and *Prélude in D Flat Major (‘Raindrop’), Op. 28, No. 15* Ólafur Arnalds & Alice Sara Ott, *Lamentation for a Lost Life* and *Horizon Variations* by Max Richter. The Youtube and Spotify playlists have been updated with them; I encourage you to listen! The music makes up a great deal of my inspiration for this fic; it keeps me writing.
The young woman must be no more than twenty-six or so years old. Will watches her from a second floor window, the one in the library behind the piano. On a clear day, the sunlight tends to spill through the curtains to pool over the instrument, reflecting light from the ivory keys. Today is partly cloudy, not much sun, but the blue sky is visible for the first time in what seems like weeks, bringing people out from the safety and warmth of their homes.

A couple is walking the park outside, hand in hand, heads bent close in intent conversation. The man walks with a languid sort of ease, hair a messy mop, coat open over his blue sweater. The woman, on the other hand, strides forward with purpose, coat cinched shut against the cold, angled bob fluttering over her bright red scarf.

Will wonders if they look that incongruously harmonious, Hannibal and her, when they walk side by side. This couple stands together in a way that showcases the years behind their relationship, an easy and intimate comprehension of the other thrumming in the small spaces between their limbs. A detail-oriented, thorough perfectionist, this young woman; Will can see it in her hair and her clothes and the way she tilts her head. In contrast, the young man broadcasts a laidback ease with the chaos of the world, in the lax slope of his shoulders and the lightness around his lips. Even at his young age, he has done much and seen much; very little surprises him anymore.

“What are you thinking?” Hannibal hums into her ear. He comes up to wrap around her in a possessive embrace, arms winding over her stomach and across her hip. She leans into it despite herself; his hands knowingly fit over the light bruises hidden under her clothing, bruises he put there just last night.

“My mind is clearer,” Will tells him, “my vision sharper. My perception. For the first time in a long time, it doesn’t hurt to look.”

Hannibal says nothing, instead following her gaze outside. He watches them too, this couple ambling around the small park in front of the row of townhouses. “Mr. and Mrs. Takahashi. They live across from us on the opposite row.”

“Ah,” Will nods, “the photographer husband and his writer wife. That makes sense.”

“What does?”

Will relays her observations with quiet words. “Look at how she walks. The precise line of her haircut. The folds of her trench coat.”

“Attention to detail.”

“Severe attention,” Will turns around, wrapping her own arms around his torso and setting his chin upon his chest. “Sounds like a certain someone I know.”
“I used to get so distracted as a child,” Hannibal confesses with a hum, “always reading every word of every footnote, always coordinating every color, always feeling so put out when I couldn’t correct a minutely crooked line on the dining table. The urge is no longer as intense, but perhaps only because I have learned to channel it through every aspect of my life. It can certainly be debilitating if left unchecked.”

Obsessive-compulsive disorder. Will is not surprised, but she warms whenever she hears of stories from Hannibal’s childhood, that distant faded mirage from whence he was shaped. She wants to know everything there is to know about him, even (especially) about these little faults he carries into the future. It makes him more than an idea, more than a mere flight of her fancy; it makes him human.

“When you are better and if you are amenable, we should have them over for dinner,” Hannibal resumes, referring to the couple outside. “They have returned from their journeys at last. I am certain that they will have the most interesting stories.”


“Before or after the wedding?”

Will laughs, delighted. “Before, Hannibal; I don’t think we’ll manage to get a wedding ready until at least the summer.”

Hannibal smiles down at her, that soft narrowing of his eyes, the bend of his lips as they lift. “Benjamin, one of the ER attending physicians, is as of yet unattached. He is an adventurous young man; perhaps his temperament will find a match with Beverly.”

“One of your former students?”

“The only former resident of mine that I have agreed to hire into our team so far, though he did leave for a brief fellowship in Switzerland before returning to us as an attending.”

“You’ll hire Ariadne’s friend, though.”

“If Yuriko would like to stay, there will be a place for her, yes. But I will not tether her from her ambitions; she has much potential and deserves the freedom to pursue her own interests.”

Humming once again, Will presses her face into his neck and inhales. Cedarwood, vetiver, pine. She closes her eyes. “This Benjamin a handsome fellow? Beverly has ‘exacting standards,’ or so she likes to say.”

“Oh, quite handsome. Fit as well, and he can be a bit of a charmer when he’s interested.” Will has to grin; Hannibal likes to pretend that he’s above such things, but he notices the good-looking ones. Aesthetics and all. “If Beverly proves to be interesting to him, then he will make the effort.”

“Oh, she’ll be interesting alright,” Will says with confidence, “she snagged my attention, after all.”
searing lips stoking the fire. His hips push against her, heavy and insistent. She allows her legs to fall open, hooking her ankles behind his back as he fills her up excruciatingly slow. A groan from her throat; she lifts her hips to urge him faster.

Maintaining his pace despite her vocal complaints, Hannibal frames the bones of her hips in his hands, holding them just so. There are still bruises there from last night. They might have gotten carried away; it’s been a little while.

He reaches between her legs to where they are joined, still slowly thrusting as his finger traces up, finding her clit and stroking. Her hand flies to clutch at his arm, fingers digging in hard enough to break skin.

“Ah—Hannibal—too much—”

He bends down to place an open mouth over her chest, across her collarbones, over her breast. “No such thing,” he assures her, “when you are with me. Let go, Will. I have you.”

Will gasps, body rocking upwards from a thrust. Too much. Hannibal wants her to orgasm first, and then again, and then a third time after that, deriving his pleasure from watching her fall apart—it’s not because he likes her vulnerability, but because he relishes in her absolute, unflinching trust. She trusts him and it gives him power; with pleasure and an encompassing provision, he repays that trust.

I have you, he says with his eyes. Will holds his gaze, biting down on her lip as her first orgasmsmashes into her body like a breaking wave. Trust me, his eyes implore, and Will tastes blood.

“Does it hurt?” Hannibal asks afterwards, when they lie tangled together under a spill of moonlight. The drapes are open tonight, the skies clear. He presses a kiss upon her mouth, licking at her bruised lip. “You bit down on it with some force.”

“And whose fault was that, hmm?” Will stretches out underneath him, pulling them closer together. It does hurt, with a sweet ache that she wants to keep forever.

Hannibal pulls back, cupping the weight of her head in one hand, thumb pressing down on the bruise. The ache grows stronger, Will breathes harder; Hannibal watches her with glittering eyes. When the split on her lip begins bleeding again, small red droplets gathering over the cut, he leans down for another kiss. The taste of her blood shared between them, Hannibal hums against her mouth with delight.

It’s good, Will thinks languidly, it’s good that I’m not the only one. Hannibal is obsessed. She can see it now. Hannibal obsesses over her, over every detail of her life and every mark on her body, over every thought that passes across her mind. She works her fingers into his hair, holding him in place. If she is falling, she will not fall alone; she will take him down with her, over the edge of the cliff and into the abyss below.

It’s alright. It’s more than good. The darkness is theirs; they fell in love with it a long time ago.

On Saturday morning, as promised, Hannibal leaves early. Will wakes up when the other side of the bed is still sleep-warm but empty, sheets desolate in his absence. She curls into a ball and draws the blankets around her. She can still hear him, dressing in the bathroom perhaps, but it doesn’t make her
any less lonely.

“Good morning, my darling,” he greets her when he emerges, dressed and ready for the day even at such an ungodly hour. Gentle fingers card through her hair. “I did not mean to wake you.”

“Mm. Market. I know. S’ok. You were gone and it woke me up.”

They have slept and woken together for more than twelve days now and for Will’s body, it has become a rhythm.

“I will be back before you know it,” Hannibal assures her.

Will turns over to lay on her back, blinking up at him with bleary eyes. “Ridiculous, aren’t we? Barely able to tolerate separation. What are we to do when it’s time to return to real life?”

“We shall be miserable. I, for one, will constantly long for your presence beside me.” Even as he tells her so, he rises from the bed and makes ready to leave. “I must go. The fish wait for no man.”

Laughing, Will waves him away. “Go get ‘em, then. Don’t let the best ones get away.”

“Never,” he smiles, donning his coat. “Your medicines are on the table, please do not forget to take them.”

With a warm goodbye, he is gone at last, leaving Will alone for the first time in almost two weeks. She lays motionless in their bed, listening to the sounds of the house settling around her. It is quiet.

She tries but finds herself unable to return to sleep. After about an hour, she abandons the effort and rises to tug the sheets in order, take her medicines, and indulge in a bath. His tub is large enough for her to spread her limbs and submerge, luxuriating in the humid heat, the oils against her skin, and the candles smelling of rosewood and figs. It takes her a while to step out. She finds one of Hannibal’s cable-knit sweaters and tugs it over her naked body without giving it too much thought; something about the scent of it… the dogs nose at her ankles when she comes downstairs. Food and water for them, then.

After showering them with affection, Will wanders around. In Hannibal’s absence, it is as though the rooms have frozen into still life photographs, the quiet house holding its breath until its master returns to grace the halls once again. But within each panel of this place is a story of Hannibal’s picking. There are many rooms in Hannibal’s house: the cellar, shelves full of preserves, produce, and wines; the library and adjoining study, walls lined with books and artefacts; and the dining and sitting rooms, meant to awe, exhibit, scintillate, and entertain. Will has enjoyed unraveling them one by one, taking her time to savor the subtleties, the clues hidden away in a framed portrait, the secrets ensconced within the pages of a book.

The two adjoining townhouses he bought were remodeled to his obvious specifications, its interior dimensions clearly catering to his priorities. If a guest walks through the foyer in a straight line, the foremost doors open to the dining room. The kitchen is large and well-appointed, filled with light from windows facing the street out front and the garden behind them. Walls have been removed to unite the whole of the second floor for an expansive library and study, one half of which is for working and the other half for leisure. The leisurely half is Will’s favorite space in the house: for the theremin and harpsichord, for the floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with classics, for the roaring fireplace, for the comfortable divan, for the tall windows bringing in light from outside.

There is even a space in the basement, next door to the cellar, that has been refitted as an indoor gym, complete with weights and equipment, overhead beams and parquet floors, yoga mats and balancing
balls. Will happily recalls the morning she spent sitting on a yoga mat watching Hannibal work out. Oh, the thoughts that ran through her head; Beverly would have been proud.

She wanders through the dining room, hands hovering over the table. Will thinks of the menu Hannibal has prepared, an elaborate and sensuous presentation of the season. Well, Hannibal doesn’t think it’s elaborate at all, “quite simple, really,” he had said, but it’s elaborate enough for Will. She doubts there is much she can do to help him out, although he has assured her that there will be plenty for her to do. How long until he comes back? Will catches the thought with a sigh.

On his desk in the study is a portrait of her in charcoal, unfinished. The one he drew of her while she slept on the divan, her cheek pillowed on her arm, her face a picture of exhaustion. But somehow, under the spill of light and through the strokes of his thoughtful lines, she still looks divine, an otherworldly quality about the curl of her eyelashes and the tips of her fingers. Is this how Hannibal sees her? If so, then he’s further gone than she’d imagined.

*We’re both far gone,* she muses, *we’re in this too deep.*

It's going to destroy her if this falls apart. Her stomach falls as she thinks of the risk, like a dark chasm yawning under her feet. Nevertheless, she clings tightly to this reality she and Hannibal have created together, because it's all she has. She just has to do all she can to make sure they stay together.

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_Aru toki ya_ *Will there come a time*_

_Koto no ha mo chiri when these words will scatter too_*

_Ochiba ka na like those fallen leaves?_

_(Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*)_

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"Kaiseki ryori, at its roots a Buddhist convention, traditionally has two aperitifs, eight courses, dessert, and tea," Hannibal explains, fussing over the onion dressing while Will cleans the fish. "They are fairly small servings, however, so what we have is enough." (1)

"Gods, it should be." The ingredients spread over the kitchen island is dizzying in both number and variety. "You'd think we were cooking for twelve."

Apart from roots, legumes, and vegetables Hannibal already had in his stock, he brought home mussels and scallops, sea urchins and seaweed, caviar and sea cucumbers, salmon, trout, sea bream, oyster, and crab. Certainly Will's surprise is not to be mistaken for dislike—she is more than eager to partake of whatever delicious creation will emerge from these disparate parts—but she has never before seen so much of food for one table. Considering present company, maybe she should get used to it.
"If we were cooking for twelve, darling, I'd require more help. Ah, that is sufficient, I think," Hannibal tells her, so she surrenders the sea bream to his command. He takes the cleaned fish to the cutting board, where with a sharp Japanese blade he sections it into six. This fish will be broiled and served as the fifth or sixth course, Will forgets; Hannibal has the menu in his head.

Despite herself, Will enjoys their day spent preparing in the kitchen, only briefly disturbed by a lunch they share in the dining room, where Hannibal relishes feeding her sushi by hand. She practices a handful of knife techniques (Batonnet, Brunoise, chiffonade), familiarizes with strange vegetables (lily root, physalis, taro stalks), and becomes a beginner saucier. It must be a skill honed within and transferred from the hospital, this ability to keep running track of six different dishes and teach at the same time. Within these walls, Hannibal is in his element: the apron is his mantle, the kitchen his well-ordered kingdom.

At four in the afternoon, they are mostly finished. They have prepared everything that can be done in advance, some dishes keeping warm while others chilling in the fridge. Will has laid out the many little bowls and plates, now sitting in stacks on the island, waiting for their time. The soup will be the last, which Hannibal will set to simmer closer to dinner.

"Beverly's leaving her place now," Will relays, thumbing through her phone which she left on the nightstand in their bedroom. "Alana says she will be here in an hour and a half."

"Time enough to bathe. Will you join me?" Hannibal holds out his hand, beckoning Will into an embrace.

"I don't think I'll ever say no," she smiles, "so you can stop asking and just manhandle me like I know you want to."

Hannibal sniffs, diffident even as he turns on the shower and lifts his sweater off of Will. "That would be rude. You are not a child."

"I took advantage of your bathtub this morning," Will steps under the hot spray of water, "why haven't I done that before?"

"Did you like the candles? I chose them for you."

Of course he did. Rosewood and figs. Hannibal isn't the type to luxuriate in a bath by himself, unless there is a purpose behind it—soaking sore legs and aching muscles after hours in surgery, perhaps.

Will answers with a kiss, standing on tiptoes until Hannibal bends down and accommodates her instead. He hums into her mouth and makes her way down the column of her throat, tipping her face up to the water such that she has to close her eyes. There is time enough for this, Will absently thinks. His hands curve underneath her thighs, lifting her with ease; when her back meets the wall, laughter peals out of her mouth in delight.

"Better make it quick, then," Will grins into his jaw, hooking her ankles behind his back.

Hannibal only smiles. "We have time."

Nevertheless, he takes little of it to satisfy both of them. Will emerges from the water languid and flushed. Before they dress, he sits her down and takes her vital signs for the log. "Those are manipulated values," Will accuses him, "they shouldn't count." Her heart rate is lower than they have been and her blood pressure textbook perfect; sex does wonders for the body.

"One of the earliest lessons I teach my residents is to never regard a single value, but to look at the overall trend," Hannibal cheekily points out. "It is a single value, my dear. The trend is what
Will laughs, "Last night's value was also affected! And so was this morning!"

"And yet you look better than you have all week already, even after only two days of my, ah, ministrations."

"Someone's cocky."

"Last I checked, you seemed to like it." Hannibal teases with a playful glimmer in his eyes, but does follow with a more serious note, "Have I ever failed to satisfy you?"

"Never," Will smiles, and for that she doesn't even have to think.

They dress and prepare side by side; he insists in drying her hair for her and in turn she buttons his shirt and cuffs. Will opts for a turtleneck to hide the bitemarks and small bruises on her shoulders and neck, although she allows Hannibal to choose the color.

"This one," he says, handing her a ribbed sweater in indigo blue, the color so deep it is almost black. "It'll bring out your eyes."

To match, she wears a black skirt that falls right below her knees and the same black heels she wore at the opera. Hannibal, of course, coordinates with her colors, wearing a slate grey suit pinstriped with a blue of the same tone as her sweater but a lighter shade. It also brings out his eyes, which are startlingly golden in this light; she wonders what that eye color would look like on a child of theirs. Her stomach clenches with sudden, choking want.

"I appreciate that you take such good care of this," Hannibal takes her hand and slips the alexandrite ring onto her finger, rubbing his thumb once over its sparkling surface. He places a kiss on it for good measure. "It gives me joy to see you wear it."

"It's two centuries old; the least I can do is respect it," she snorts. Meanwhile, he drapes the rose necklace around her neck, afterwards smoothing his hands down the length of her arms. Complete ownership: Will reads it in his eyes. Mine, his hands tell her, all mine. She revels in it.

When has she last been this spoiled? Has she ever been this cared for? What will Alana think? Beverly will not let her live it down. An eager anxiety knots in her belly until she is worked up and tense once more, the afterglow of Hannibal's attention dimming when they return downstairs. It's not all bad, though; she finds herself excited to see Beverly again and looks forward to Ariadne and Yuriko. Even the prospect of observant, incisive Alana doesn't seem so intimidating anymore. Will can handle the scrutiny; this is home ground, and she is not alone.

Hannibal catches her humming as she helps set the table, plucking at the bone-white twigs and the cherry blossom petals scattered among them. "What song is that?" he asks, lighting the candles in the middle.

Will smiles. "Looking out on the morning rain, I used to feel so uninspired," she sings, dancing out of Hannibal's reach and towards the kitchen. "And when I knew I had to face another day, lord, it made me feel so tired. Before the day I met you, life was so unkind, but you're the key to my peace of mind."(2)

“Likewise,” Hannibal assures her, steps sure behind her own, “your smile has brought light to my life.”

Will turns to accuse him of being a romantic sap, but her words are stolen by the ring of a bell.
“That would be our guests,” he sighs.

“I’ll get them,” she chuckles, tiptoeing for a quick kiss to his jaw when she passes him by. “Tend to the dishes, chef. Beverly will be hungry.”

Some of the dogs follow her to the door, emerging from the warmth of the living room where they were mostly curled up near the fire. They are overall well-behaved, having been fed before Will and Hannibal went up to shower. Cooper nudges her leg and gives a single bark, perhaps able to smell Beverly through the threshold.

Will can hear them talking through the door: Beverly’s voice is bright, saying something indeterminate to Alana, and then laughter from them both. They’re getting along swimmingly, it seems. Then again, they both possess more social skills in their pinky fingers than Will does in her whole body. She shakes her head and tells herself to get over it; they are her guests, she is the host. This is not the time, Graham.

“Hi,” Will smiles when she opens the door for them, “thanks for coming.” The cold is thankfully bracing when it hits her. Can’t fuck up tonight.

“Willow Graham!” Beverly whistles, stepping inside to hold her at length with both arms. “Or should I say Willow Lecter?”

“Not married yet, Bev. You’d know, you’re invited. Hi, Alana. I hope Bev hasn’t given you too much of a hard time,” Will exchanges a brief hug with her, glad that they are still able to do as much. The dogs nose around their legs, tails wagging away, excited about new scents. Well, Alana and Beverly are both familiar, but anything recently from outside excites canine noses; they’re refreshingly simple to please, Will’s dogs.

“We actually parked next to each other down the street,” Alana smiles, smartly dressed in pinks and mauves underneath her grey coat. “It’s always so hard to find parking in this neighborhood, and with the new development two blocks down, it hasn’t gotten any better.”

“Gentrification!” Beverly sheds her layers too; Will, as a proper host, takes the coats and puts them away, snagging the tasseled end of a scarf before Cooper can put it in his mouth. “Hey, cutie pie! Will, is it just me, or did he get fatter since the last time I saw him?”

“Fatter, definitely. Hannibal feeds them too well. Speaking of the devil, come on in, he has champagne, I think.”

Will leads them into the living room, or reception as Hannibal calls it, where they are swarmed with more dogs. Alana bends down to hug Georgie and coo at Winston; Beverly already has Cooper in her arms. Hannibal enters shortly with a tray of refreshments, though he stops at the door to observe the rabble with much amusement.

“Well, hello there, Dr. Debonair!” Beverly greets, swinging around with a happy dog lolling at her shoulder. Alana laughs behind her. “Thanks for having us over. Will’s told me about your fantastic—”

“—don’t say it—”

“—cooking, Willow Graham, I was going to talk about his cooking, what did you think I was going to say?” Beverly wears that shit-eating grin of hers that Will can only roll her eyes at. “Christ on a stick, girl, keep it PG-13, there are innocent ears around! Poor Cooper’s still a baby, can’t be corrupting him this early or he’ll forever be traumatized!”
“Cooper is a cavalier fellow, he won’t mind,” Hannibal assures them all, handing Alana a flute of champagne while Will gets a glass of something non-alcoholic. Must be the sparkling concoction he was stirring with the yuzu earlier. (Apparently, Keppra, her antiepileptic, does not mix well with alcohol.) “There is more than enough champagne, but I can get you beer, Beverly. I am told you prefer it.”

“The beer,” Alana nods, sipping her own champagne with appreciation but sending a nudge of a look at Beverly. “He brews his own.”

Beverly gapes; Hannibal nods. “The beer, it is. Perhaps one later for you as well, Alana.”

“I do have to drive home,” Alana chuckles, just as the doorbell rings once again. “More guests?”

Will goes to open the door once more, finding her own intern and Hannibal’s resident looking about with great interest. The two of them are dressed to match, grey dresses and black coats, leggings and ankle boots, as if to drive further home that they are twins in all but blood.

“Good evening, Miss Will,” they chime in perfect unison, Ariadne looking quite sober but Yuriko bright-eyed in excitement. “Thank you for having us as guests.”

“Oh, er, good evening as well,” Will blinks, taken aback at their voices in perfect stereo. “Come on in. I hope you didn’t have a hard time finding the place.”

“Oh, no, we live quite close,” they both say, still in stereo even as they begin to shed their coats.

“That,” Beverly notes from the doorway, “is freaky. Cool! But freaky.”

“So we’ve been told,” they say, words in perfect sync but tones in counterpoint; Yuriko sounds like she has recently ingested large amounts of caffeine. “We’re not offended.”

“Sensei, konbanwa!” Yuriko chirps, sighting Hannibal and snapping into a sharp bow. “Ojamashimasu!”

“Ojamashimasu,” Ariadne echoes, also falling into a bow but a softer one. “Gokigenyo, Lecter-hakase.”

“Youkoso, ofutaritomo,” Hannibal responds in perfectly pitched Japanese. (3)

Will assumes that they are formal greetings from guest to host, going by the pleased twinkle in Hannibal’s eyes. They, more than anyone else here, might actually appreciate the menu tonight.

“Alana, Beverly, one of my residents on rotation, Yuriko Reizei,” Hannibal introduces as the common acquaintance. “She is close friends with Miss Black, whom you both know.”

“It’s a small world,” Beverly remarks, as Alana exchanges greetings with Ariadne. “Gotta be careful who I pick up at the club.”

“That’s your concern?” Will drily snorts, handing the girls their champagne. Hannibal briefly disappears to fetch Beverly’s beer; Yuriko giggles into her drink.

“Legitimate concern! What if I pick up Jack’s brother’s wife’s cousin or something?”

“Jack doesn’t have a brother,” Will points out.

“Not the point!”
Winston nudges Ariadne’s leg, tail wagging away. “Hello there,” she greets the dog, meeting its brown canine eyes. “What’s your name?”

“That one’s Winston,” Will then points to the others and in succession introduces, “Georgie, Lila, Buster, Mango, Dee, and that one in Beverly’s loving arms is Cooper.”

“Wow,” Yuriko blinks. “Seven!”

“Sending off some of them to new homes,” Will sighs, reaching down to rub Winston’s head. “I’m only keeping two.”

“Oh, I see,” Yuriko nods, “because sensei’s a cat person.”

“Is he?” Ariadne asks, head tilting sideways in that peculiar manner of hers. “He could also pass for a dog person, I think?”

“At first impression, maybe, but once you work with him, you’ll see. He’s a total cat person,” Yuriko insists, “fastidious, independent, territorial. You should see him when one of our baby ducklings bungle a procedure on one of his patients. He gets like a cat dropped in water. Hiss hiss, hackles raised! Judging the level of your intellect with his glowing eyes, inferior peon!”

Alana, Beverly, and Will all erupt in varying shades of laughter; Ariadne only says, “Huh.”

Hannibal then returns, beer in hand and good humor about his shoulders. “I seem to have missed the punch line once again. Do share, what are we laughing about?”

Will grins at him. “Cat people.”

The others erupt in laughter once more.

It’s the meds and the rest, the company, the warmth: Will feels good, and as a result, her vision is unleashed. She lets it go for the first time in a while, allowing the curtains to fall back. Everyone here is safe, she thinks, everyone here I know.

Alana has picked her best color for this night: she feels unsure of her welcome and is reinforcing herself through her impeccable appearance. She looks good and she knows it; from this knowledge, she can derive confidence to redirect where it is sorely needed. Yuriko and Ariadne are radiating curiosity, eyes roving about the shelves on the wall and the art they can see, the dogs, the humans, Will and Hannibal themselves—but they are being polite about it, reining in the urge to ask until a more opportune moment. Beverly, for her part, is just having a good time: she is with friends; there are dogs; and, the booze is good. Beverly is the easiest to please.

They sit for dinner without further ado; after all, nothing lowers barriers like sharing a meal. Hannibal sits at the head of the table, Will to his right and Yuriko to his left. Beside Yuriko sits Ariadne; beside Will sits Beverly; and at last, beside Beverly sits Alana.

"What's on the menu for tonight?" Beverly nudges her, eager for spoilers.

"Japanese," Will smiles, declining to elaborate any further. "Part of the experience is not knowing, or so I am told."
Yuriko, at the mention of Japanese, begins to vibrate. "Masaka—kaiseki?" (4)

"Yes, that's what Hannibal called it," Will nods, "you'll have to forgive me, my Japanese is non-existent."

Yuriko shoots a gleeful grin at her twin-friend, who appears impressed. "Kaiseki ryori is quite difficult to prepare," Ariadne remarks. "It must have taken all day."

"Just about. I helped where I could. But he refused help for the serving," Will sighs, to which Alana responds with a laugh.

"Hannibal has always served his meals himself," she says, "he relishes the theatrics of it, I think."

"You seem to have known him for quite some time, Dr. Bloom," says Ariadne, snooping but in a polite manner.

Alana then explains their prior professional relationship, all the while with Will sipping on her citrusy drink and tamping down her irrational jealousies. What passed between him and Alana is now long gone: Will has seen for herself the truth in Hannibal's eyes. Now if only her heart could listen to reason.

"He did derive a lot from Japanese cuisine for his past culinary creations," Alana is now telling Yuriko, "minimalist aesthetics and such. But I don't think I've had a full Japanese menu at his table, so this should be a treat."

"Does he throw dinner parties?" Beverly asks, "because I'm so in. Dibs on a seat, Mrs. Lecter!"

"He hasn't for a while," Will chuckles, "but I'll let him know."

"Oh, it's been so long since the last time we had kaiseki," Yuriko moans longingly, grabbing Ariadne by the shoulder. "Remember when we were in Kyoto and had dinner at that overpriced kaiseki restaurant that was allegedly the best, but it was like trash next to the spread we had at Koya-san?"

"But the monks had an unfair advantage, Yuri-chan; they began the tradition." (5)

"I will forever remember Gion by that horrible shiromiso they served us at that place. Horrible." Yuriko shudders, shaking her head. "The food has ruined my memory of that whole district!"

"Food has always been a vehicle for memory. You can consume something and remember it forever. The food will be gone, but the memory remains," Hannibal comments, emerging from the kitchen with a tray balanced in his hand. "A true chef serves memory and soul through the food, which then in turn incites memory and soul from the guest; it becomes a conversation. What does this remind me of? What does it provoke in you?"

As a signal that the meal has begun, his words resound like poetry. Will folds her hands in her lap and looks up, expectant, as Hannibal serves her first. "Sakizuke: the first course."

Pink and fresh *hamachi* wrapped delicately around a pyramid of bright orange salmon roe, seasoned with basil and adorned with a single basil flower. Painfully simple, a splash of spring-time color against a bone-white plate.

There is silence across the table as they are served and bid to savor the taste of the opening notes in a symphony. The *hamachi* evokes the Pacific upon her tongue, salt and sun, a gift of the ocean.

Yuriko makes a small noise, eyes closed and lips lifted in delight. "Shiokaze. The salty breeze against
your face when you stand on a hill overlooking the sea."

"Haeryong," Beverly nods, "where my mother is from. Fairly boring town, lots of farms, little temples, the sea. Great seafood, though! I’ve only been once."

"She doesn’t return home often, your mother?" Hannibal asks.

"What captive, after a taste of freedom, ever wants to return to the cage? Or so she likes to tell me. Her family is incredibly conservative; they wanted her to marry some stuffy dude from some bigshot political clan and set up a family, et cetera, yadda yadda. Well, the day after graduating with her degree, she took a train to Incheon, a plane to San Francisco, and a job at a pharmaceutical firm as a research assistant. Never told them about any of it until she was already sitting in her roomshare off of Haight Street. Never looked back since."

Will laughs, easily able to imagine a woman with Beverly’s same indomitable spirit and bright, cheerful smile. "Your mom sounds badass."

"She was when she was single," Beverly snorts, "but then she got married, birthed three kids, and became exactly what she ran away from. Super conservative upbringing, remember? I went to Catholic school. Get it?"

"But why," Ariadne asks, perplexed, "would she subject you to the very environment she loathed when growing up?"

"Because as much as she hated it, she knows it taught her discipline and grit," Hannibal elucidates with the ease of someone who obviously agrees. "She wanted to impart the same gifts to you."

"Oh, it taught me grit, alright," Beverly grumbles. "Nothing like a good sneak out of Catholic school to teach you about the sacrifices you have to make in life." Quietly, Alana laughs.

Hannibal rises from his seat to fetch the second dish, quietly and once again refusing Will’s offer to help. Yuriko carries on with the conversation.

"At least you got to go to school," she points out, "because I didn’t. We were always traveling too much. It was never worth it to actually enroll anywhere. I was tutored or self-taught most of the time."

"Your parents’ work required the travel?" asks Alana.

Yuriko nods, hair bobbing around her petite freckled face. "Maman is a marine biologist and otou-san an overqualified photожournalist with a post-grad ecology degree. They met on a research stint in Patagonia. Maman was pregnant within six months. Très scandaleux! Except they didn’t care; Maman kept diving until she couldn’t and otou-san bullied his project’s direct oversight into letting him stay with her."

“Your mother is French?” Will asks, curious. Yuriko’s accent does not sound Quebecois or Parisian like Hannibal.

“French-Norwegian! She grew up dividing her time between Bergen and Tangier,” Yuriko adds with a grin at Beverly’s perplexed look. “Grand-père and Mormor—grandmother—were in academia too. Mediterranean Islamic history and biochemistry, respectively.”

“Okay, you made me feel like a stranger to planet earth with that one paragraph,” Beverly blinks. “I am uncultured swine.”
Alana, however, is chuckling. “You are definitely Hannibal’s type of student.”

“I defer to your experience, senpai,” Yuriko exaggeratedly bows, as low as she can manage without planting her face on the table. Will assumes that she is acknowledging Alana’s seniority as Hannibal’s prior protégé. How many protégés has he had, Will wonders? (How many of them got as close as Alana?)

Hannibal arrives with the second dish, which he calls hassun. There are eight small portions of food arrayed artfully in lacquered Japanese dishes. This time, the dishes are black, making the bright colors stand out in stark contrast for their eyes to feast upon.

“Alright, what am I eating?” Beverly asks, chopsticks poised in the air.

In order, Hannibal enumerates, “Deep fried ginkgo nuts in physalis, or groundcherries; dried konoko, or ovary of sea cucumbers; lily bulbs, pureed, with caviar; sea urchin with nori seaweed sauce; okra with ume, or plum, sauce; hirozuiki, white taro stalks; baby cucumbers with a traditional moromi-miso dip—it will be salty, with the taste of barley; and finally, shiromiso with renkon. You are meant to have the soup last to prepare your palate for the next dish.”

Will places the sea urchin in her mouth, acknowledging the unusual texture and feeling as though they are diving down deeper into the ocean with each course. Ariadne is making distinct sounds of delight, tonight more bright-eyed than Will has ever seen her, and Yuriko is crooning, “Konoko, renkon, nori ume miso~” with childlike joy.

“Oh my god,” Beverly groans, “where have you been all my life? Can I please be a permanent guest at your table?”

“Certainly,” Hannibal tells her, “and I shall be offended if you do not come to the dinner parties. Of course you are invited to the wedding, isn’t that so, darling?”

“Of course,” Will balances a slippery pickled cucumber on top of a chunk of okra, “who else will straight up tell me if I look fat in the dress?”

“Is there a dress?” Alana asks, leaning in, intrigued.

“Yes,” Hannibal says, at the same time that Will says, “Not yet.”

Will turns to frown at him. “Yes?”

“It is, of course, contingent upon your approval.”

“Do I want to know how much of this you’ve already planned out?”

“Perhaps later, when you are more mentally prepared for it,” Hannibal teasingly denies her. “Eat your lilies, darling.”

After the second course, they are served sashimi, dashi-fermented salmon which Will had helped prepare. Mukozuke, Hannibal calls it, fresh fish before anything that has been cooked, in order for the tongue to enjoy it without distractions.

“My parents used to tell me a story about when they were in Patagonia,” Yuriko tells them, “and they had nothing to eat but salmon and squirrel meat because their supplies had gotten washed away in the river during a storm. Maman still hates salmon to this day; you can’t make her eat it.”

“But salmon aren’t native to Patagonia, are they?” Ariadne frowns; Will has to wonder who walks
around holding such random trivia in their heads.

“They aren’t; they were introduced there. That’s part of what Maman and otou-san were studying.”

Their fourth dish is the grilled course, *yakimono*, traditionally done with grilled fish but Hannibal is serving brined and marinated Wagyu beef instead. There is a hot stone upon which they are meant to sear the thin, red cuts of raw meat.

“But how long were your parents out in the wild without supplies?” Alana asks. “That must have been difficult, even for them, and especially back then.”

“Oh, a week or so, but they weren’t alone. They had local guides with them who knew what to do. And besides, in that environment, they shouldn’t lack for food if they get creative.”

Ariadne tilts her head and wonders, “If one had to resort to consuming human flesh in such a situation, would that be too creative?”

A beat of silence pulses across the table, but only because Yuriko’s mouth was full; as soon as she swallows, she says, “In an extreme situation, where there are no other options, and human flesh was available? I don’t see why not.”

Alana makes a face. Beverly says, “Remind me not to get stranded on the Pacific with you lot.”

“I mean, I don’t know about killing your fellow castaway for meat,” Yuriko continues, speculative. “I did swear an oath.”

“I didn’t,” Ariadne points out, “I can butcher for us, Yuri-chan.” Alana puts down her chopsticks and coughs.

“Child,” Beverly says now, “you are so special.”

“It *would* be a foolish waste of resources, in such a scenario. It could mean survival,” Will points out. “There are documented cases. The line we draw to separate ourselves from what we refuse to do in the context of civilization can bend and easily break under threat of death in the wild. Remove us from civilization and we’re barely more than wild animals. After all, everything that constitutes what we know as civilization are constructs we created to shackle ourselves.”

Bobbing her head in agreement, Yuriko asks, “What do you think, sensei? Would you consume human flesh if the situation were dire enough?”

For his part, Hannibal beatifically smiles at them and points out, “I do know how to get the best cuts.”

“Ha,” Will dryly snorts, while the rest of the table erupts in halfway outraged laughter. “You think you’re so funny.”

“I do, as a matter of fact,” and Will can see that he must be enjoying himself; he’s almost grinning. “I consider my humor a personal point of strength.”

“Alright, then, chef,” Will challenges playfully, “what would be your best cuts for steak de humain?” Tongue literally in cheek, she picks up her last strip of seared Wagyu to dip it in salt, pepper, and mirin-infused soy sauce. The flesh all but melts in her mouth.

“Since you seem sincerely interested, I shall indulge your curiosity,” Hannibal is chuckling now. “The flank will yield a nicely marbled portion of meat because of the balance of fat and muscle
typical of most humans in this area. If the source is an athlete, the thighs will produce lean, healthy cuts. But perhaps the most tender pieces will come from the psoas major, which, while multifunctional, are rather deep and often underutilized in most people unless they happen to exercise with plenty of weights.”

“So literally tenderloins!” Yuriko chirps. “Yum!”

“I,” Beverly declares, “have learned that all of you are special. Very, incredibly special. In the most special of ways.”

Sensing a natural segue in the conversation, Hannibal rises to collect their dishes and bring the next course out. When he disappears into the kitchen, Beverly tells Will, “I see now why you’re good together. The two of you are weird.”

“Unique,” Will corrects, “I like to think of us as unique.”

“ Weird.”

The fifth dish, aemono, is a cold dish to contrast with the last one. The oyster is elegantly presented before Will, now adorned with the finicky onion-based dressing Hannibal was laboring over earlier in the day. Anywhere else in a restaurant, such a dish would cost a miniature fortune, especially during this season, but Will can dare say that Hannibal’s rendition is finer than any oyster dish they can find in the best restaurants in town. She has to wonder if Hannibal is friends with other local chefs or if he spurns their company in his own form of quiet elitism.

“Voluntary survivalist cannibalism aside,” Hannibal says, “I heard from Will that congratulations are in order, Beverly.”

Beverly’s face splits open with a wide grin. “Thanks! It was totally unexpected.”

“Nah,” Will dismisses, just as Alana says, “It was entirely expected. Jack doesn’t pick people on baseless whims.”

They exchange a glance and Will continues, “We might have our professional disagreements, Jack and I, but I will say that he’s a talented profiler in his own right. Perhaps not in the way that is very useful on the field like I am, but he knows people. He recognizes talent. And besides,” she nudges Beverly with an elbow, “your skillset is far more diverse than mine, what are you being shy for?”

“Oh, do you mean the technical skills?” Beverly flaps a hand, “You pick those up practically by osmosis where I went to college.”

“And that is where, precisely?” Hannibal inquires.

“UC Berkeley. Tech town. Tons of awesome people, but unfortunately not far enough away from my overbearing parents, so I had to go elsewhere for grad school.”

“Oh, I like Berkeley a lot,” Alana lights up. “California has such nice weather, and I’ve enjoyed the people there the few times I’ve gone for conferences. What did you major in? We probably have mutual acquaintances.”

“Probably, it’s a small world, and it gets even smaller the more specialized you become. I did Integrative Biology,” Beverly grins, “to trick my parents into thinking I’m taking it for pre-med but actually I was gunning for Forensics all along.”

“They would not have approved of Forensics?” Ariadne asks, plate having been cleaned very
thoroughly of the onion dressing. Ariadne must like oysters. Expensive taste.

“They don’t mind it so much anymore, but the thought of their precious eldest daughter in law enforcement would have been too un-traditional back then. And anyway, they really wanted me to become a doctor. You know, Asian parent.”

“Yep,” Yuriko nods authoritatively, “doctor, or lawyer, or go home. Or, well, don’t ever go home.”

“That’s not why you became a doctor, though,” Will says.

Yuriko laughs. “Oh, no! Maman knew I was going into the biosciences when I skinned and dissected a cat at age eleven. I picked out the web of vasculature in its lungs and learned how to dye it blue and red from one of Maman’s chemist friends. Otou-san took nice pictures and helped me mount it. It’s still on display in our house in Bergen! –oh, the cat was already deceased, of course; I’d never hurt a furry friend!”

Hannibal nods in approval. “A worthy project to train your skills in anatomy. I shall keep it in mind for our future children.”

“So long as you leave my dogs alone,” Will side-eyes him in an unsubtle warning.

“I would never touch the dogs, darling, they are part of the family. No, we will find a suitable subject.” He says this while reaching for their dishes, rising for yet another cycle. “Please excuse the wait, I will take a moment to plate the next dish. Now would be a good time for a break if you wish to use the ladies’ room. Do enjoy the sake; it is seasonal and quite delicious, if I do say so myself.”

Once again, Will offers to help; once again, Hannibal refuses. Stymied, she sags against her seat with a sigh, watching Beverly pour Alana some sake as the twins hold a non-verbal debate with only eye-contact and elbow nudges.

She considers Yuriko, Hannibal’s bright protégé, whose unorthodox upbringing shines through her words and ideas. The two of them, Yuriko and Ariadne, share a moral ambiguity that would be disturbing if Will herself didn’t share a similar kind. Perhaps because neither of them grew up in the context of common social structures, perhaps because of what they have studied over time—this is the type of person Hannibal prefers. Morally ambiguous, flexible, and therefore capable of a more encompassing, unbiased view of the world.

That’s why Alana won’t do, Will realizes all of a sudden, not with her upright morals and her conventional upbringing. Stable foundations but it boxes her into preconceived social constructs. Too limited. Too common.

And if Hannibal is anything, he is a purveyor of the uncommon.

He returns shortly with the sixth dish, while Beverly and Alana are deep in conversation about California. Will looks up at him with a soft smile.

We are both unique, she thinks, briefly catching his hand when he sits down once again, and that’s alright. We can be unique together.

Thereafter are four more courses they enjoy before dessert: nimono, a simmered course of crab meat
with winter melons and dressed in ginger sauce; *mushimono*, sea bream broiled with magnolia leaves; *su-zakana*, trout cooked with kombu in a vinegar and ponzu base; and *gohan*, the rice course, with an assortment of tsukemono, or pickled vegetables, to break the monotony of the rice. Will doesn’t think she has enough space for dessert, but Hannibal has worked hard for each course, and besides which, it must be good to have Yuriko so excited.

“*Mizumono* is the best part of kaiseki,” she nods vigorously, “and it doesn’t matter how much you ate because there’s always a separate stomach for dessert.” Ariadne nods to this declaration. “It’s still the tail end of winter so it should be something sweet and heavy, like bean paste.”

She is correct, of course; Hannibal brings out warabimochi paired with shirokoshi-an, a sweet white bean paste that is lighter than the azuki red bean Will has had with Japanese desserts before. To aid their digestion, Hannibal has brewed high-quality gyokuro for them to enjoy.

They take the tea into the study upstairs, where twin gasps of delight erupt from Ariadne and Yuriko upon sight of the floor-to-ceiling shelves, the harpsichord, the fireplace and the art. Yuriko zooms toward a particular collection of books on the wall, their spines an old red-tinted leather, and drags Ariadne with her. They explode into rapid-fire enthusiastic French, too nuanced with their shared jargon and too strangely accented for Will to completely understand.

“Uh-oh, the nerds have found a shiny,” Beverly chuckles, now once again carrying a comatose Cooper in her arms. She wanders around the shelves while Alana seats herself near the fire. Beverly eyes a few of the volumes on the sciences section and clicks her tongue. “*Very* nice collection, doc. Acquisitions or inheritances?”

“A bit of both,” Hannibal says, “although a large section of the Lecter library was destroyed during the war and subsequent Soviet occupation.”

“Eastern Europe?”

“Lithuania. It’s a shame; I am told that several of my ancestors were also avid purveyors of fine art and literature. I have most of the most precious remaining volumes here with me, and a few in Paris, but what has been lost is surely greater.”

“Sensei,” Yuriko interrupts with a giddy sort of disbelief, “is that an original?” She points at *La scapigliata*, hanging half-dressed in shadow on the wall. She reads the answer on Hannibal’s face and lets out a high-pitched squeak, whirling to clutch at Ariadne. “I told you it was the original!”

Alana looks around, noting aloud that only a few items have changed, although she does comment on the new mahogany work desk across from Hannibal’s. On it sits Will’s laptop, papers, and sundry documents from work. “An actual workdesk instead of sitting on the couch with the dogs?”

“It’s nice,” Will smiles, glancing over. “I think I’ll actually get shit done. Although I might not sign up to teach next semester, we’ll see.”

“Oh? Other plans?”

Will reads hesitance and jealousy in Alana’s face: she is thinking of a wedding, a honeymoon, a child…

“Jack hired me back, gave me an intern, and instated Beverly to give me a partner,” Will says in stark counterpoint. “Freak bout of encephalitis aside, the groundwork is being laid out for a team, and he obviously wants me to lead it. You know as well as I do how Jack gets when he latches on to an idea.”
“You think it’s his idea?” Beverly frowns. “I mean, that’s the direction the whole bureau is going with profiling; they don’t like you guys working independently anymore. Burnout risk is too high. The thing with Gideon two years ago, and then you taking a break until recently…”

Will shrugs. “Of course he’s also competing with Strauss, who from what I hear has a solid team in the works, but that’s a secondary motive for Jack. He has quarry to catch first.”

“The Ripper,” Alana sighs. “He won’t let go of it.”

“Nope!” Beverly tosses the last of her wine back. “Not since Miriam Lass.”

Alana tilts her head in curiosity. “Who’s Miriam Lass?”

“A baby agent Jack was growing a few years ago, I met her a few times when she came to ask questions. I was new, back then. She was also new. An intern.” Beverly clicks her tongue. “She went missing and they still haven’t found her.”

“Missing?” Alana is taken aback. “What was she doing?”

“Investigating the Ripper, of course. Jack has a fixation on the guy. Although back then, I get the impression that Jack was only chasing the Ripper because he needed rep under his belt and the Ripper’s pretty much the biggest fish you could catch. And then Miriam goes missing—”

“—so it becomes personal,” Alana sighs with a frown of understanding. “I’ve always wondered why. Jack’s not the type to randomly choose what he’s gonna chase.”

“A very deliberate man, Jack Crawford,” Hannibal muses, arm coming to rest around Will’s shoulder. They are pressed together, side to side, their limbs aligned. “What a frightening prospect, to be hunted with such persistent focus. This Ripper must be quite accomplished indeed.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know who he is, you read TattleCrime,” Will snorts.

“No, he doesn’t,” Beverly gasps in dismay.

“Yes, he does.”

“I only began reading it because I was curious about you,” Hannibal chuckles. “If you wish me to stop, just say the word.”

Will rolls her eyes, exchanging a look of disappointment with Beverly. “Far be it for me to rob you of your lurid sensationalist entertainment, Dr. Lecter. We must all have a supply of the requisite degenerate brain rot in our lives, and where better to acquire it than straight from the vile source?”

The room vibrates with laughter, Alana coughing on the mouthful of wine she was about to swallow.

“One has to wonder how Miss Lounds acquires her material. She always seems to be ahead of the curve,” Ariadne remarks, opting to sit on the floor to have Georgie spread on her lap.

Yuriko sprawls next to her, having deconstructed a wooden puzzle that sat on one of the shelves; she is now attempting to solve it. “Maybe she’s like Rita Skeeter! A secret Animagus! Check your clothes for a bug!”

Beverly snorts. “If she were an Animagus, she’d be a snake. Or a cockroach. The gross kind that flies.”

“A fox,” Will hums, looking into the fire, where the orange edges of the flame remind her of how
Freddie’s hair had gleamed under the hospital’s fluorescent lights the last time they saw each other many months ago. “Cunning and wild. Fast, too. Light on her feet. Hard to catch. Always underfoot. She’s impressive in her own right. Highly intelligent and not the least bit sociopathic with how she uses human relationships around her. If pushed, she won’t stop at anything to get what she wants. She might even commit murder for it, although she’s too smart to let it get that far in the first place. Always an escape route available. Always a scapegoat too.”

Alana exhales loudly, releasing a long breath as her shoulders sag forward. “Will, how long have you been feeling ill?”

Blinking at the sudden turn of conversation, Will turns. “Sorry?”

“I’ve forgotten how… incisive you are, when you’re on your game. Maybe because we haven’t really spent much time recently,” and there is an echo of regret there, a little touch of hurt. “But hearing you now—you’ve been sick for far longer than you’ve let on, haven’t you? Because now, the difference is obvious. You haven’t been yourself in a while.”

Will doesn’t know what to say to that, because… does she want to admit how ill she’s been? How much she’s been ignoring it? All the things it says about how she regards herself… all the connotations it would bring to the table. She doesn’t want to sour Beverly’s perception of her. Or Hannibal’s. Although at this point, she doubts there is anything she could say or do, short of outright murder, that would chase him away. And yet…

“In some ways, the illness was useful to me,” Will confesses quietly. “The… forts I’ve built in my head, the boundaries, they… were more, ah, porous, I suppose you could say. It was paradoxically easier to do what I do. Sink into their minds, subsume their lives, think like they think. Harder to pull myself out afterwards, of course, although Hannibal helped a lot, but it was useful. I learned a few things. The boundaries between sanity and insanity really is a social construct, you know.”

Hannibal’s hand tightens on her shoulder, grounding.

They are quiet for a while, until Alana looks to Hannibal and asks, “Have the serologies for her CSF workup returned yet? I’m curious what virus they’ve isolated.”

“Just today, in fact,” Hannibal nods, to which Will curiously looks up. He smiles down at her, that minute shift of expression that is just for her. “Powassan virus encephalitis, quite rare and therefore of much interest to some of my colleagues in Infectious Disease. They might want to talk to you, darling.” (6)

“I don’t even know what it is.”

“A tick-borne flavivirus closely related to the deer tick virus, transmitted to humans from six different species of ticks,” Ariadne recites, as though reading from an encyclopedia. “The tick Ix. scapularis, however, is the likeliest vector, given that it is a generalist feeder and readily bites humans. This is the same tick that transmits Lyme disease across most of North America. One must wonder where you were exposed to such a thing.”

Beverly’s face makes a moue of cautious disgust. “The woods in the back of your house?”

“Minnesota,” Will frowns.

“Oh.”

“Why Minnesota?” Ariadne asks, head once again tilting in that birdlike manner of hers.

“We had a case there,” Beverly grimaces, “awful thing. Had us tramping around the forest looking
for the unsub’s lair. Those woods were deer-hunting grounds. Great, now I’m itchy.”

“Oh, you’re quite safe now, if you’ve come this far without exhibiting symptoms,” Ariadne reassures her.

“Still. I got all up in that cabin and the unsub butchered deer in there too. Ugh. I need a shower.”

“Am I allowed to ask what that case was about?” Yuriko looks up from her puzzle, which is almost complete.

Will’s lips twist in a mirthless smile, recalling their earlier conversation. “Funny that you should ask. That killer was a cannibal. Not the survivalist cannibalism, mind, but the kind that justifies it as honoring his kill. Like native tribes do when they use every part of an animal’s carcass. Except it’s not the same thing, because that’s not honor.”

“No?” Yuriko tilts her head, a perfect mirror to Ariadne.

“Consumption is not about honor, nor has it ever been. At its root, consumption is one organism triumphing over another, a movement of nature, a note of evolution. At its best, consumption can a proof of superiority and therefore a celebration of victory, but at its most base, well,” Will sighs, “it’s the strong squashing the weak. It’s a statement of debasement. They weren’t even worthy of being treated with the honor befitting a human being in death; they were just prey to overcome and then consume, at the behest of the predator. He was just calling it honor to make himself feel better. We’re all capable of such grand illusions if we put our minds to it, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Men are, in reality, conduits of food, tombs of animals, harbingers of death, and coverings that consume, deriving life by the death of others,” Hannibal hums, pressing an affectionate kiss into her hair, “but then if we were all to realize this truth, well, it would be a very uncomfortable world indeed.”

Will turns further into Hannibal’s warmth, although Beverly raises a (refilled) glass at Hannibal’s words. “You’re terribly cavalier about all this, doc. Gotta say, you’ve got tough skin to be able to keep up with us.”

“I’ve seen and done things in my own time, and my life has not always been full of ease as I make it seem. Eastern Europe under Soviet occupation was not a pleasant place to grow up,” he says, and leaves it at that.

Will has calculated the timeline for herself since learning of Hannibal’s past: he would have been a child during the heat of the underground revolts against Lithuania’s second Soviet occupation. The resistance was strong then, in the ‘70s and ‘80s, but the international support was not. Human rights violations would have been rampant. The Soviets would not have taken kindly to an ancient lineage like that of Hannibal’s family; after all, their line has been extant since the old kingdoms of the Baltic. They were representatives of a history inconsistent with the communist manifesto, a history people could use as propaganda. A history that needed to be suppressed.

Tilting her head back on his shoulder, Will looks into Hannibal’s face, wondering at how fortunate she is that this man has made it to her. “The things we are capable of,” she hums, “the things we will do for belief.”

“It makes for a beautiful armor, but a clumsy weapon.”

Will smiles now, eyes dark. “You know what makes for a deadly weapon? Garrett Jacob Hobbs used it.”
“Hate?” Ariadne guesses quietly.

Beverly shrugs. “Dunno, I’m not the profiler.”

“The mirror of hate,” Hannibal answers correctly, “which is love.”

“Bingo,” Will snaps her fingers.

Alana chuckles. “You have an aptitude for this, Hannibal. Perhaps the next time you consider a career change.” There is an edge to her words, but it is mild and more playful, perhaps because of the few drinks she’s had to loosen her up.

“Yeah, doc, you’ve already tagged along to one case, wasn’t that fun?” Beverly grins. “Different, I know, but fun!”

He chuckles along, fingers drumming on Will’s upper arm and shoulder. “I wouldn’t want to step on Will’s toes.”

Will snorts. “Oh, don’t worry about my toes, they’re all numb from all the stomping Jack’s done the past few months.”

“You really ought to tell him that,” Alana sighs. “Otherwise he won’t back off.”

“Jack’s Jack; he will never back off. Not until we catch the Ripper, and maybe not even then. Men like him, they always need something to chase, and I’m his best hound.”

“Alright, fine, I lose, I just—” Alana sighs and holds her hands up, “I just don’t want you to break, Will, alright, so please just take care of yourself. I don’t like seeing my friends hurting like you were.”

And for a moment, perhaps because she has had enough alcohol for it, or perhaps because being in Hannibal’s study overwhelms her with memories of what once was, Alana is shrouded in a veil of complete surrender, a veil she does not wear well. Defeat does not suit a woman of strength such as her.

Will sits up out of Hannibal’s embrace and reaches out, driven by an urge to comfort. Placing a tentative hand on Alana’s shoulder, Will tries to convey her gratitude. “You know I appreciate everything you do for me, right?”

It takes a her a moment, but Alana swallows with an audible click and looks up with a sad smile. “Well, if you want to appreciate me better, then you need to learn to appreciate yourself. Let Hannibal teach you. There’s only one of you in the world, Will, and no matter what Jack says, these killers are not worth breaking yourself over. You’re worth more than that. Don’t let them break you.”

Will nods. “I won’t.”

“And when you forget,” Beverly pipes cheerfully, “the rest of us will be here to remind you of who you are. So you don’t lose yourself in them anymore, like you did with poor ol’ Georgia. After all, what else are friends for?”

In that moment, the surge of affection rushes through Will with such strength that it takes all of her strength not to cry. So she just smiles.

“Thanks, you guys. Really.”
All this time, she suffered in silence and loneliness, but in truth, she has never been alone.

“Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art. It has no survival value; rather, it is one of those things which give value to survival.”

( C.S. Lewis )

They enjoy a few days of silence and the solace of each other’s company after their successful dinner, well-deserved, Will thinks, because the dinner exhausted her more than she cares to admit. Hannibal is unnecessarily apologetic when she sleeps the whole of the following day, coddling her with her favorite soups and the privilege of having Winston sleep in the bedroom with them.

Despite her exhaustion, she doesn’t spike a fever, something they both take as a positive sign of her recovery. It reassures Hannibal that she can be left alone for a day, so that he may attend a symposium wherein he is billed to speak.

“Of course you’re going,” Will frowns, fingers stilling where they are combing through his hair. “I’ll be fine here. You do what you have to do.” She has already cost him enough time off work.

“It is no big concern of mine, missing the symposium,” Hannibal starts to say, but she shushes him with a finger, before his excuses get out of hand.

“You’re going,” Will insists with finality.

He sighs. “Very well.”

Satie’s bucolic notes tinkle through the air for a moment, until Hannibal, who is laying with his head on Will’s lap, sighs once again.

“I dislike leaving you here alone for so long.”

“Nine hours, Hannibal.”

“A whole day.”

“Nine hours. Or less, knowing you. I’ll be just fine.”

Hannibal seizes her hand to press kisses into her fingers. “I will attempt to be home as early as I can.”

“Don’t walk away from the required socialization on my account,” Will snorts. “They start talking when you start disappearing.”

Nevertheless, on the day of the symposium, Hannibal puts off his departure long enough to surely miss the first speaker and returns home far earlier than Will thought he would. Early enough to
prepare dinner, he says, but Will knows it’s because the separation chafes. She had been similarly restless the entire day, attempting to lose herself in a book in vain. She amused herself with the piano for a few hours, and then played with the dogs, and then sat on the kitchen island eating the lunch Hannibal prepared for her with her bare fingers, delighting at how horrified he would be if he knew. She explored the guest bedrooms upstairs, imagining how one of them would look as a nursery—the one next to the master, so that they are never too far away. Pale blue walls, maybe, and a white crib with baby yellow blankets. Maybe she’ll even learn how to knit.

When he comes home, she is there at the door, at once in his arms before he even removes his coat. Hannibal pulls her in, hand closing firm around the back of her neck, mouths pressed together in relief. They are almost like teenagers in their eagerness, Will thinks, as she breathes in and strokes her tongue against his. She smooths her palms down the broad spread of his shoulders: mine.

“How was your day?” she asks when they pause long enough to speak, seeking out his eyes which glow golden in the waning afternoon light.

“Duller without you. Have you eaten?”

“Not since lunch. I had a coffee, though.” Will helps him out of the coat and then tucks her arm into the crook of his elbow, tugging him towards the kitchen. “I would like pasta tonight.” She can ask these things now, she is not alone, she has someone to ask, and it feels good, so good, to have the certainty of his affection. Will can scarcely imagine a time without it.

Their time together continues uninterrupted for the next two days. Will is almost convinced that they are the only two people left in the world, until Thursday afternoon, when the doorbell rings and shatters their peace.

“Hello, Jack,” Will actually has a smile for the man, although Hannibal does not. Nevertheless, Hannibal has invited him into the living room downstairs, where Will comes down to meet him. Hannibal has gone to fetch them tea.

“Will. You look well.” He sounds stiff; there is a case.

“I’m very well, thank you for visiting. Sorry I’ve been out for so long, but it sounds like you guys closed the last case just fine without me, so.”

“Yes, well, Georgia Madchen surrendered herself and closed it for us.”

“I heard.”

Silence stretches between them for a moment, Jack unable to look her in the eyes. It is a strange reversal, Jack avoiding her gaze. He blames himself for her illness. It isn’t entirely his fault, although his pushing didn’t help. No doubt Alana has had words with him about it.

Jack clears his throat. “How much longer do you think you’ll be out of the field?”

Best hound, Will huffs with amusement. “Where’s the case?”

Jack sighs, looking distinctly uncomfortable. He holds his response as Hannibal returns with tea. They pour and stir in a brief, weighted silence.
Hannibal peers into Will’s face, sipping his tea, and then tilts his head. “There is a case.”

Will smiles, chagrined. “Jack hasn’t said anything yet. I think he doesn’t want to step on your toes.” They’ve already discussed how her own toes are a non-issue.

Jack throws both of his hands up. “I don’t want to push too hard if you’re still not ready. But I have to ask, at least. You’re the best we’ve got.”

“It is just two weeks since her seizure, Agent Crawford,” Hannibal frowns in reproach. “Will is much better, yes, but she is still in recovery.”

“I understand, I do.”

“How bad?” Will asks.

Jack inhales, squaring his shoulders. “Bad. Difficult case, and a bureaucratic nightmare. I need it solved fast, otherwise I would ask Strauss for Rossi.”

“What happened to Gideon?”

“Tied up in Nevada on another case, that one’s pretty bad too,” he sighs. “Don’t think I didn’t consider him.”

Will lowers her teacup and looks up into Hannibal’s face. “Can’t go unless the doctor releases me, though.”

Visibly, Jack deflates, shoulders sagging in dismay. Hannibal, however, has not looked away from Will, seemingly reading something from the lines of her face. “Agent Crawford, will you excuse us for a moment?”

“Uh, of course. Of course.”

Hannibal offers her a hand and leads her upstairs to the study, where he crowds her against the back of the couch and frames her face with his hands. He strokes her cheekbones, peers into her eyes, and searchingly asks, “Do you think you can handle it, returning to the field?”

“I think so,” Will nods, “although I’ve never been the best judge of my own capacity, I think we can both agree.”

“You were addled by your disease, it only stands to reason that your judgment was affected,” Hannibal shakes his head, pondering. “I do not want you to relapse, but I do not want to hinder your passion either. You find purpose and fulfillment in what you do; it would be remiss of me to keep you from it.”

Something twinges in Will’s chest, a chord of emotion that almost chokes her throat. Tiptoeing, she presses their lips together briefly in gratitude. “I think I’ll be fine, but I’ll defer to your judgment. Whatever you think is best, doctor.”

Hannibal peers at her for a moment more, before they separate with twin sighs. Hand in hand, they return downstairs, where Jack is waiting.

“I must apologize, Agent Crawford,” Hannibal says; Jack sags once again, looking down into his empty cup of tea, “but would it be possible for me to accompany Will on the case?”

Will turns; Jack blinks.
“I understand that it is a federal investigation, and that there would be... stipulations,” Hannibal inclines his head, “but if I were present to monitor Will’s wellbeing and ensure that she doesn’t tire herself...”

Jack straightens to attention. “I can make it happen. You’ll need to sign some documents, but the bureau has hired medical consultants on a case by case basis before, it’s not like there’s no precedent. If you just so happen to be there to watch Will’s condition, well, no one needs to know that, do they?”

But before things can go any further, Will grips and tugs at Hannibal’s hand, turning to level him with a concerned frown. “Hannibal, no. You’ve already taken two weeks’ leave for me. This is too much.”

“Will, what did I tell you? There is no such thing when you are with me.” When she remains staunchly unimpressed, he gently adds, “The department owes me quite a lot of holiday time. I did not take any vacations last year, or the year before that, and we are entitled to at least a month every year, not including sick time. It is of no concern to take another week or two if it means I can accompany you.”

“If you prefer, Will can be strictly advisory only,” Jack even adds, attempting to sweeten the deal.

Will pins him down with a look. “No. If you want me on it, it’s mine.”

Jack dips his head, surrendering the point but unable to obscure his satisfaction. He knows he’s already won.

“Beverly and Alana giving you ideas,” Will clicks her tongue and shakes her head, but in truth, the thought of returning to the field is a little easier to swallow if she knows that Hannibal will be there. He will be able to see if Will starts fraying at the edges again, he’ll catch it before it gets actively bad.

All I need is one case, Will knows, one case to bolster my confidence.

If she can do this, if she can test her mettle against a case and succeed, then she will know that she’s ready to return and take on the reins of a team full-time.

“Do I have your full authority?” Will asks.

Jack grins. “Of course, SSA Graham.”

“Fine. Where’s the case?”

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

(1) Kaiseki ryori 会席料理 used to refer to the frugal meals served in the style of austere Japanese tea ceremonies by the Zen Buddhist monks in the 16th century. However, modern kaiseki derives influences from a number of traditional Japanese haute cuisines, notably yusoku ryori (imperial court cuisine) from 9th century Heian-kyo, shojin ryori (lit. devotion cuisine, Buddhist cuisine served in temples) from 12th century Kamakura period, honzen ryori (cuisine from samurai households) from...
14th century Muromachi period, and cha kaiseki (tea ceremony cuisine) from 15th century Higashiyama period.

There are different formats and interpretations of modern kaiseki, depending on where you are eating and what training the chef has. (And also how much money you’re willing to shell.) At its core, kaiseki is considered an art form that balances taste, texture, presentation, and temperature of food. Fresh, high-quality ingredients are key in order to emphasize natural flavors. Seasonal, local ingredients are often included as well. Formal kaiseki can include up to 14 courses and take up to 4 hours to complete. There is traditional order of dishes but courses can be added, removed, or modified at the discretion of the chef. With his menu, Hannibal has changed some things around, so it’s not as traditional as formal kaiseki, but I can assure you it’s just as expensive.

(2) This song is Aretha Franklin’s *You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman*. I originally had *City of Stars* from La La Land here, but changed it up in light of recent events. RIP, queen. Thank you for your soul.

(3) **Ojamashimasu**: lit. *I am about to intrude*, means “please excuse my intrusion” and routinely said before entering someone else’s house or private space. **Gokigenyo**: “how do you do” or “farewell,” may be used interchangeably, very formal and old fashioned way of greeting an honored person. **Youkoso, ofutaritomo**: lit. *welcome to both of you*, youkoso is a routine welcome you will often get when you are ushered into a restaurant or, in this instance, someone’s house.

(4) Masaka—kaiseki? “Could it be—kaiseki?”

(5) I would say that the most traditional kaiseki I had in Japan was the dinner we had the night we stayed at a Buddhist temple with the monks at Koya-san. Koya-san (Mt. Koya) is a temple settlement in Wakayama just south of Osaka, first settled by the monk Kukai in 819 AD where he eventually founded Shingon (Esoteric) Buddhism (derived from Vajrayana Buddhism). The monks there allow travelers to stay at the temple for a few days in order to experience how life is in a Buddhist monastery. They cook *shojin ryori* everyday, and while it’s not fancy food, it is very clean and healthy eating, painstakingly prepared with attention to taste and freshness.

On that note, the fanciest, most extravagant, and arguably most delicious meal I had in Japan was a 14-course kaiseki dinner at a very exclusive, expensive restaurant in Kyoto called **Nakamura**. (It wasn’t even that expensive, though, considering the ingredients... spent about $430 per person, including sake and tea.) The restaurant boasts **three** Michelin stars and the current chef is the sixth generation in the family; they have been in business since 1827, almost 200 years, and used to cater to emperors. Every piece was edible art and the service was phenomenal. They only have four private rooms, each with a view of a Japanese garden, so reservations are a must. I died for the dessert: homemade fig ice cream topped with nashi pears, grapes, yellow peaches, and glazed with white wine jelly. Also, the (expensive af) Hamasaka snow crab was fucking delicious. That meal was life-changing. [Here’s a preview.](https://example.com)

(6) **Powassan virus encephalitis**, as Ariadne told you, is transmitted through tick bites and yes, it can occur as a co-infection with Lyme disease. It’s not that common but it is curable and more doable than anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis in this case. Cases have happened in Minnesota. There is no standardized treatment; about 50% of cases result in permanent neurological damage and about 15% result in death.

End Notes
FST TRACKLIST
1. Vienna Teng - Pontchartrain
2. Vienna Teng - Now Three
3. Arvo Part - Spiegel im Spiegel
4. Joep Beving - The light she brings
5. Austici - Winter Heather, Frozen Breath
6. Ólafur Arnalds & Alice Sara Ott - Eyes Shut
7. Max Richter & Dinah Washington - This Bitter Earth (Shutter Island ver.)
8. Dinah Washington - This Bitter Earth (original jazz standard)
9. Ketil Bjørnstad - Pianology 1
10. Stacey Kent - Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered
11. Ella Fitzgerald - Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered (1956 version)
12. Frederic Chopin - Nocturne No. 19 Op. 72 No. 1 in E Minor
13. Ludovico Einaudi - Eros
15. Ludovico Einaudi - The Crane Dance
16. Light Jazz Academy - Someday My Prince Will Come
17. The Civil Wars - Dance Me To The End Of Love
18. Trent Reznor & Atticus Ross - The Gentle Hum of Anxiety
20. Joep Beving - 432 (Prehension)
21. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky - The Seasons Op. 37b: X. Octobre (Chant d'automne), as performed by Mikhail Pletnev
22. Ólafur Arnalds & Alice Sara Ott - Letters of a Traveller
23. Ólafur Arnalds & Alice Sara Ott - Prélude in D Flat Major (‘Raindrop’), Op. 28, No. 15
24. Max Richter - Lamentation for a Lost Life
25. Max Richter - Horizon Variations
26. Aretha Franklin - (You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman
27. Mark Hemmeler, Ray Brown - Girl Talk

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