Overcoming

Jade Green
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Chapter 1

Twenty-five years ago, the Earl of Reddig entered into a contract with the Duke of Westvale to give one of his grandchildren of marriageable age to the Duke's grandson, the Marquess of Clarges, at a time when it suited him to one day marry.

He had happily put that contract behind him and did everyone the disservice of dying without mentioning said contract to his son, Statton Graham, who became the new Earl quite ignorant of his father's machinations until now.

Dumbfounded, he stared at the man who came in the Duke's stead, one Mr. Eldon Stammets, and said with no little fear, "I have never in my life seen this document, nor did I agree to it."

Eldon Stammets considered himself a man of some distinction, a man of note in the ducal household, entrusted with the most private and dearest of instructions from the Lecter family. He was not about to be dissuaded by anyone who was not of the esteemed Lecter family, be they Earl or Alpha or any combination thereof.

"I am sorry," he said, the words careful and polite, his features schooled into calm despite the rising tide of inner offense. "I fear I was not clear. Perhaps you would like to take a moment and reread the contract once more?"

"I don't need to reread it!" Lord Reddig said, incensed, his round cheeks filling with color. "I am telling you now, I am not abiding by a contract which I have not signed!"

"I am afraid I have the necessary legal paperwork to the contrary," Eldon said, cautious to be gentle as if pressing the point were to change his mind. "The previous Earl signed it some twenty-five years ago, clearly agreeing to give one of his grandchildren in marriage in exchange for an alliance with the Lecter line; more specifically, one of your eligible children to wed the Duke's grandson and heir."

"His grandson who has been missing from this country for the past ten years," Lord Reddig said, speaking loudly enough to be heard in the hallway. "The same grandson whose arrogance and stubbornness and previous marriage are the subjects of gossip to an unending degree? The very same grandson we all assumed would gladly give up his inheritance to spend his days as a country doctor when he retired from the military—that grandson?"

Eldon stiffened at hearing the Lecter family spoken of in such a way. "Are you attempting to tell me, Lord Reddig, that you consider the contract null and void?"

"No, you twit, I'm saying in the meantime I unknowingly married my daughters off to men who are wealthy enough to care for them and very much on this country's soil, sir! I have no daughters left!"

Mr. Stammets was not a man who would willingly return in defeat nor be easily put off of his given task. Patiently, he said, "I am aware that you do, in fact, have a daughter of marriageable age. She is some eighteen years now, is she not? Not yet Out? She will do quite nicely, I am sure. His Grace desires me to return at once with a report of the child, so please have her presented."

Lord Reddig stared at him once again, his blue eyes wide and unblinking.

"It is a longstanding agreement, my Lord. It is Expected," Eldon said, reminding him of his duty.

"Mr. Stammets," Lord Reddig said, his mind working quickly to find a way out. "Hannibal Lecter is notorious in his temper. He already stands condemned in the public eye as a murderer of his late wife. What guarantee do I have that my daughter will not be mistreated?"

He looked down at the contract and read it twice. Nowhere did it say that they had to be female, only that they must be of childbearing age and capable of providing the expected Alpha male children to continue the Lecter line. While Lord Reddig was not willing to part with his youngest daughter to a murderous and intolerable future Duke, he was more than happy to be rid of the Omega born alongside her.

"The former Lady Clarges died of unfortunate natural causes and your daughter is a noblewoman," Mr. Stammets said, shocked and embarrassed at his lack of discretion. "I assure you, my Lord, that no one in His Grace's household would treat a gently-bred lady with anything other than respect and delicacy."

Lord Reddig snorted and stood. He caught the eye of his butler, and said loudly, "Blake, fetch me Willia."
Blake started at the unfamiliar name, but rapidly gathered himself, taking his cues from his master's wide-eyed glare.

“Of course, my Lord,” he said, nodding. “It will take some time, however, as she is...”

“Reviewing cook’s menu,” Lord Reddig filled in, clearing his throat. “It will take a short while to let her ready herself, Mr. Stammets. You know how particular females are about their appearance.”

“I am in a hurry,” Mr. Stammets said, displeased. “But I wish to see her at her absolute best. I am content to wait.”

Lord Reddig gave him a wavering smile and rang for tea, hoping his plan would work.

zzz

“What’s happening?” Will asked for the thousandth time, confused by the flurry of activity around him. So far, in between the estate office and the house, he’d only been told he must hurry, he must look presentable, and he must mind his manners.

“Has something happened?”

He was shuttled into his sister’s suite without further explanation and was confronted by all manner of dresses being flung about in such haste that the maids all looked fit to faint.

Blake was giving quiet, clipped orders to Mina’s maids. Mina herself was pale and wide-eyed near her dressing room, quite bloodless and shocked. Concerned for his twin sister, Will called her name and she gave him a half-smile that meant something terrible had happened and he was to make sure she didn’t suffer for it, as always.

“Will,” she said, sweetly and with wheedling intent that he was immediately worried by. “Father has a great favor to ask of you.”

Will tensed, knowing his father asked very little of him but his absence, since Will had the temerity to be born Omegan rather than a “full” boy.

“Mr. Graham, his Lordship has indicated that he wishes you to meet a visitor,” Blake said, frowning softly. “Please, Mr. Graham, if you could undress?”

“Undress?”

“Will, darling, there’s really no time,” Mina said, hastening towards him, wringing her pale little hands before her, the picture of worry. “This visitor is not patient and you don’t wish to upset Father, do you? You know how it goes if you upset him.”

Mystified and frightened, Will started to do as he was asked despite the many people in the room. No one in this household had ever been particularly thoughtful of him for the past eighteen years and he did not expect them to start now, but it was still terribly embarrassing to take his clothes off in front of so many critical, assessing pairs of eyes.

Apparently he moved too slowly for the moment, because in a trice no less than four of Mina’s maids lit on him and stripped him down to his skin.

Flushed with mortification, Will covered his groin with his hands, protesting softly as they tugged at his limbs to dress him. His objections were overridden, unheard by his sister, who exchanged heated conversation with Blake.

“What is happening?” He reached a volume that made both of them look at him, annoyed. Beseeching, he quieted somewhat as the maids began to dress him in Mina’s clothing and asked again, “Please... what is happening? Why are you dressing me in your clothes?”

“Will, Father wishes you to play a role in my stead,” Mina said, deciding her best means to success was his acceptance and collusion. “Willia, you will answer to. Do you understand?”

Will cringed as he was corseted and encased in silk and satin from stockings to throat. He was, luckily, as slender as his sister and her healthy bust gave allowance in her clothing for his broader shoulders, but they were otherwise quite alike from their riotous dark curls and limpid blue eyes to the tiny crook in their pinky toes.

“Mina,” he said, unused to nay saying his sister because it had always earned him his father’s wrath for the past eighteen years. “Father has always threatened to hang me should he ever find me in a frock!”

“Mr. Graham—Lady Willia,” Blake automatically corrected, overseeing the transformation with a critical eye. “It is your place in this household to make life easier for your family, is it not? Your grandfather entered into a very surprising contract with the Duke of Westvale which would require your dear twin sister to marry a man who simply does not suit her. You shouldn’t like for that to happen, should you?”
“Will,” Mina put in, watching them arrange his curly locks into a modest hairstyle to hide their lack of length. “You would never want me to be given away to some stranger, would you? You know how long I’ve been waiting for Timothy to come round, don’t you? Surely you wouldn’t rather see me packed off to the Duke of Westvale’s snobbish heir?”

“You would be a Duchess one day,” Will said, bewildered and uncomfortable as they slid his feet into her little slippers, which were too small and far too tight. His anxious blue eyes flicked from Mina’s closed face to Blake’s own hard one. “Mina, why would you wish me to be shown in your stead when you stand to gain a duchy?”

Mina’s sideways glance to Blake warned him there was a very good reason, indeed. He fleetingly wondered how they could ask him to take her place and show mercy to her when none of them would show mercy to him, but the thought was gone before it fully formed. He had been a burden to them for the whole of his life, as his father said; the least he could do was be silent while wiser heads than his took charge.

“Darling,” Mina said, as she always did when she wished him not to argue. She even stroked his face, a rare kindness she knew he craved. “Father has already promised me to Timothy. It would be so embarrassing now to break things off, hm? Still, he cannot breach a contract with a Duke.”

Will trembled. His voice was unsteady when he said, “They will murder me for this deceit, Mina.”

That seemed to touch her when other things would not. She pet him again, careful not to disturb the job her maids were attempting on his curls. Gently, she said, “They would not dare, Will. Trust me, will you? By the time they realize you are an Omega they will be forced to accept you or risk a very damaging scandal. Please, Will. Please, do this for me? You could be a Duchess, if he is favorable to your feminine side as Father is not. At any rate, you will be marrying up, which is more than the dismal future Father has planned for you.”

Will shivered a little, uncertain but still convinced of one thing—his father’s dislike of him would ensure he would not long survive Mina’s marriage and passage from their house to her husband’s.

“And just imagine, Will,” she went on, pressing her advantage, a lively and beautiful mirror of himself whom he loved absolutely. “There is every chance you will find a happy home there. You will have status, power enough to protect you from Father, and you might even find that Hannibal Lecter is tolerable to deal with. You could be happy, darling, hm?”

“Perhaps this is for the best...” he whispered, the corset making him even more breathless than his sudden hope.

“Mr. Graham, you know better than to question your father’s decisions,” Blake scolded, uniformly disapproving of the way he was dressed. “He is an Alpha, after all. Alphas always know what is best for creatures such as you.”

Will ducked his head, a scarlet flush climbing his cheeks.

“You look so much like me,” Mina said, tipping his chin up again to look at him. “It’s like looking into a mirror when I’m very sad and fragile.”

“We have no more time, I’m afraid,” Blake said, nodding that the getup would do for now. “Come along, Mr. Gr—er, Lady Willia.”

Will followed him, moving with ease despite the unfamiliar clothing and too-small shoes, his natural Omegan grace adapting quite nicely, his heart fluttering with excitement and fear. A thousand worries assailed him, a thousand tells that he was not what he claimed. How on earth could he hope to fool this beta, let alone the Alphas which must abound in the Duke’s household?

He started to voice this fear to Blake, but they arrived at his father’s office and a knock on the door forbade him from asking more questions. His father called entry from within and Blake announced him, holding the door wide, saying, “Lady Graham, my Lord.”

Nervous, Will stepped into the room and greeted his father, a rosy pink blush on his pale cheeks. He nodded meekly at the stranger in the room whom Blake introduced as Mr. Eldon Stammets, a servant in the employ of the Duke of Westvale. Will inclined his head again in greeting, tensing when his hand was swept up and a kiss was grazed across his knuckles.

“This is my only remaining available child, Lady Willia Graham,” Lord Reddig said, the flush on his face betraying his irritation at seeing Will got up as a woman. His anger coiled around Will like a vise, plucking at his instinct to deflect the potential violence of the Alpha who had control over him. Self-preservation won that round, as he still bore the marks of the last time he’d dared to soothe his father’s temper and found it turned on him instead. “As you can see, she is very modest and sheltered.”
Mr. Stammets released his hand, showing no curiosity over the fact that it was less soft than he might have expected. Instead, he gestured for Will to sit and waited until he had done so, arranging his skirts around him as he’d seen his sisters do countless times before and tucking his feet back out of sight to hide how ill-fitting the shoes were.

“Lady Graham,” Mr. Stammets warmly said, pleased with what he saw. “What an exquisite jewel you are! My Lord, His Grace shall be very pleased at the quality of the spouse you are providing his heir. This will be a great alliance, indeed. Now, tell me of your education.”

Will hesitated, gathering his thoughts before he answered, keeping his voice deliberately soft. “I have had the same education as any young lady expected to run a noble House. I am afraid my instruction does not differ from that of other ladies my age.”

Mr. Stammets nodded and made a small notation on the paper he was holding.

“I can surmise, then, that you are more than capable of keeping household accounts and directing staff,” he said, taking from it what he would. “But what of other ladylike accomplishments, Lady Graham?”

Will wet his lips. Mr. Stammets’ eyes lingered there and his father bristled, sensing his interest.

“I am very well-versed in the harpsichord,” Will told him, quietly doling out those accomplishments which his father had always belittled for being too feminine. “I am a tolerable singer and a very good rider. I am an ardent reader and prefer to keep my own company. I am, however, a very good listener.”

His father cleared his throat, and Will subsided, falling back into his seat as if he’d been chastised.

“Well, my dear, it sounds as if you will make Lord Clarges a biddable and agreeable wife,” Mr. Stammets said, almost rubbing his hands together with glee. “Yes, Lady Willia Graham, I believe you shall do quite nicely.”

“So, we are agreed, then?” Lord Reddig cut in, eager to be done with it.

“The final decision will rest with His Grace, but I cannot see any reason why two such lovely people should not marry, as per the contract,” Mr. Stammets said, his mind already made up. “I shall carry my observations to His Grace and return with his answer.”

“I have one condition,” Lord Reddig said, flushing. “Should His Grace agree, I wish him to send his solicitor and a proxy so the marriage can be performed here. I will have Willia leave this house secure in her new place.”

“I am sure those terms will be more than acceptable considering Lord Clarges is still some time out from arrival,” Mr. Stammets said, making another note with a smile. “He has not, of course, learned of the gracious way in which His Grace has arranged for his return, but I am confident he will be home to take his place as soon as the news is delivered.”

“Blake,” Lord Reddig called, and the office door opened immediately. “Please see that Mr. Stammets is refreshed and set out with fresh horses.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Blake said, escorting the Duke’s man out.

Will sat very still, his chest rising and falling slightly beneath the tight silk and starched, ruffled neckline of the dress. He waited for his father’s anger, for his loathing, perhaps even for a slap for his audacity. Will had very quickly been beaten out of his proclivity for pretty and soft things, shamed for his interest in dolls, his love of seemingly feminine things pruned out of him with such savagery that the memories still woke him from terrified sleep.

“Will,” his father said, and he twitched, drawing in, defensive postures which usually only incited his father to more towering rages. He did not, however, decide to indulge in one at present. Instead, he cleared his throat and softened his tone to say, “If His Grace agrees, you will marry the Lecter heir.”

“Yes, Father,” Will whispered, not looking at him, not daring to meet his gaze.

“Your sister’s clothing fits you,” Lord Reddig observed, a thread of displeasure coloring his words. “You will be packed off with her things. She is due a new trousseau for her wedding.”

“Father,” Will said in the subsequent silence, daring to steal a glance up. “They are an Alpha family. Will they not realize I am Omegan?”

His father frowned, irritated to have it pointed out to him. “Do you think yourself so clever that you have considered things which I have not?” he questioned, the sharpness of his voice cutting. Will dropped his gaze in haste, desperate not to issue an unbidden challenge. “The marriage will be signed, sealed and delivered before you are delivered to the ducal household. By the time anyone realizes you are not, in fact, your sister, it will be too late to do anything about it.”
Will schooled his face to show none of his nervous tension, but it was clear in his voice when he asked, “Will they not despise me for deceiving them?”

“Whether they do or do not is no matter to me,” Lord Reddig answered. “They are, however, a distinguished family and the contract did not specify a beta female. They wish to have another generation to secure the line of succession and you are capable of providing that, confused creature that you are.”

Will’s hands pressed over his flat belly, hard as stone beneath the cinch of the corset and bone stays. He had no choice but to answer, “Yes, Father.”

“William,” his father said, resting his forehead in his hand, his skin pale and taut. “I never dreamed a day such as this would come. Fate has worked in our favor on this count, however. At least I can spare your sister a terrible fate thanks to you. I never counted on your Omegan nature being anything other than a curse.”

“I know, Father,” Will said in a tone of apology, familiar guilt washing over him. He had tried all of his life to be the son his father wanted, disappointing him daily with his very existence, with his penchant for beauty, with his love of things his father considered emasculating, like his fascination with his sisters’ dresses, baubles, and activities.

“The fact of the matter is that despite everything, you were never the son I desired,” Lord Reddig sighed, rubbing his face with weary resignation. “At least in this you will have a use.”

“I am sorry, Father,” Will said, his voice soft and small.

His father lifted his head to stare at him, gruff and embarrassed when he admitted, “I haven’t done right by you, William. I’ve bent your nature to suit my ends and it may go the worse for you when it comes down to it.”

“I have always been glad to please, Father,” Will said, his father’s admission chilling him as no icy water ever could. It frightened him to hear his Alpha speak with such uncertainty. It upset the balance of his world to realize that his father might have made some mistake with him, that he had not, in fact, been acting in Will’s best interests by bullying him to more masculine pursuits.

“It’s that damned Omegan nature of yours!” Lord Reddig said, and Will flinched. “Of course you were glad to please! But here you are, about to be married off to a future Duke and the one good thing I could have done for you probably ruined by my desire to have a real son.”

“I am your son,” Will said, his stomach clenching with nausea, with deep fear. “If they send me back unwanted, Father, I will continue to be your son.”

“No, Will,” Lord Reddig said, looking at him with something like regret, but it quickly became the familiar dislike that had greeted Will from his earliest memories. “No, you were never my son and you never can be, no matter how much I wish it was otherwise.”

Will flinched again, ducking his head as hot tears formed in his eyes. He willed them away, fingernails biting into his palms as he fought not to cry in front of his father. Tears had been lovingly soothed from his sisters and followed by coddling and indulgence, but Will’s tears had always been thoroughly chastised and berated, resulting in his standing alone in a corner of the nursery until he could get himself “under control”. He had learned with time. Everything his father had taught him, he had learned because he could see things as his father did. It was an unspoken, unacknowledged talent he had, this strange perception of his. It was the reason that his father—rapidly understanding that proximity affected it—had insisted Will be separated from other company at an early age lest he be too much like them and less so the son he wished Will had been.

“That habit of yours,” Lord Reddig said, the only way in which he ever addressed Will’s helpless ability to take the perspective of those around him. “You will need to control it.”

“Yes, Father,” he murmured.

“William, understand that you cannot allow it to overcome your good sense!” his father insisted, scowling. “They won’t stand for such nonsense! Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father,” he said again, staring steadily at his hands fist ed in his lap, the cold wings of panic fluttering in his heart.

“This man I’m giving you to,” Lord Reddig said, not remarking Will’s distress anymore now than he ever had. “He has a reputation for being high-handed and stubborn. Do not give him any reason to be unkind to you.”

“I will not give him reasons, Father, to the best of my ability.”

“Do as he says,” his father told him. “Whatever he wants of you, you give him. Do you understand me?”
“Yes, Father.”

“Whatever he wants,” his father repeated, as he always did when he felt Will wasn’t absorbing what he was being told. “If it’s dresses and frippery, then so be it. If it’s being shut away at a distant estate bearing children in succession, then so be it. There is no room in the ducal house for the creature I raised, understand? Serve your purpose and keep them from complaint with this family.”

Will shivered, at a loss. Helpless, he looked up at his father with fear brimming in his bright blue eyes and said, “I don’t know how to be the person they want, Father.”

Something passed in Lord Reddig’s gaze, then, some slow understanding or even compassion, overdue as it was. “I know that, William. Perhaps in such a setting your natural instincts will guide you better than my necessary correction ever could.”

Will frowned and looked back at his lap, trying not to tremble with nerves.

“Go to your room,” his father said. “Tell Blake to have the servants start packing.”

“Yes, Father,” Will said.

It was the last time in a very long time that he spoke thusly with the man who had loathed him from the moment of his birth.

The Lecters were an esteemed family, a family with a long and noble history of service to the throne for which they had been remarkably rewarded with titles and holdings. They were one of the oldest Alpha families in the whole of the Empire, blue bloods bred and true.

It was only within the last century that the mighty had fallen, so to speak. The family fractured beneath the weight of its dignity and power, offshoots flung to the four corners of the Empire, and new and startling notions became the norm.

The most startling of which was the fact that the Lecter heir, Hannibal, Marquess of Clarges, had studied to become a medical doctor and actually practiced.

It was often overlooked that he did so on the battlefield as his duty to the Crown. Overlooked, of course, by a Society quick to gossip; not overlooked, however, by a bevy of concerned relatives dreading every day of combat that sought to take their Duke-in-waiting away from them, thus leaving the lines of inheritance in question.

“Another letter, m’Lord,” Berger said, pushing into his master’s tent with the missive held in front of him, a look of acute dread on his face.

Hannibal took it, leaving bloody fingerprints on the ivory-colored paper, his face already falling into a grim frown which his valet knew all too well from his years of service.

He opened it, brown eyes flicking over the paper, and sighed on a soft laugh, rolling his eyes heavenward.

“Berger.”

“Yes, m’Lord?” was the immediate response.

“Do you find thirty to be an unusually great age?”

Berger froze, uncertain. “Not terribly so, m’Lord,” he decided was safe enough.

Hannibal smirked. It was not a pleasant smirk, all things considered, but it was about as close to humor as he got these days and it relieved his valet to see it.

“Apparently,” Hannibal said, tipping his head back on another sigh. “I have been given an ultimatum.”

Berger perked up, attentive to any conditions which might involve them going home to their own blessed country.

“My dearest grandfather has bought my commission,” Hannibal said, his voice tight and dark and vastly unhappy. He handed the letter to Berger, who read it quickly, eyes widening. “I either return immediately or forfeit my place as his heir.”

“He surely wouldn’t...” Berger began, though he read it twice, disbelieving.

“My grandfather is not one to make idle threats and the lines of succession must be secured,” Hannibal said, annoyed. “It is perfectly reasonable to act as he has, just incredibly annoying and overbearing because he knows I would never forfeit.”

Berger finished the letter, swallowing hard at what he’d read there. “And the other, my Lord?” he asked, his voice a near whisper.
“On the matter of my wife?” Hannibal inquired, the polite menace of his tone making Berger wince, doubly so when those humorless amber eyes landed on him, sparkling with ire. “That matter, too, depends on my answer. Should I give up my place why, then, the young lady he has chosen will be given to my successor.”

“His Grace has already chosen,” Berger said, somewhat mystified but not entirely surprised. The letters over the years had become increasingly short and to the point. More than once the subject of a wife had been broached without answer.

“He, unfortunately, has taken my silence as assent,” Hannibal said, glowering. He waved his bloody hand in a dismissive gesture and said, “It matters not. I am sure, as the daughter of a noble, she will be perfectly capable of providing the Alpha son he desires, as any other woman. She will serve her purpose and be rewarded with a title. No gently-bred woman would wish for more, would she?”

“Oh… of course not, my Lord,” Berger agreed. “...no woman would ask for more.”

Hannibal laughed mirthlessly, his eyebrow arching over one piercing dark eye. “Believe me, Berger,” he said, shaking his head. “My grandfather would never dare hand me an Omegan wife.”

“...because they are spoken for so young, m’Lord?” Berger asked, hesitantly touching on his master’s single blind prejudice, unable to resist his curiosity about its source.

“Because they are useless irritants incapable of rational thought and I’d rather marry a mule than be saddled with an Omega,” Hannibal told him, his mild tone only putting a sting in his words. “And my grandfather knows that well enough. That aside, there is that damnably contract of his with the former Earl of Reddig. No doubt his insipid little granddaughters will be clamoring over who is to be a future Duchess.”

Berger stayed silent for a long moment before tentatively asking, “So... what will you do?”

Hannibal sighed heavily again, shaking his head hard enough that the short locks of his brown hair whispered back across his forehead.

“I suppose you must pack, Berger. We are going home.”

Chapter 2

Over a month passed before the ducal coach returned bearing several ministers of law with the marriage proxy riding alongside it.

Mina, well warned of their approach, watched with wide eyes from behind the drapes as Will was once more polished to appear in her place.

“My, what a fine seat your proxy has,” she sighed, blushing on a smile. “It is too bad he is not the heir. I should not mind being a Duchess if he were the Duke.”

Will scowled at her, asking with ill humor and sharpness borne of pure, dreadful anxiety, “And what of Timothy? Or are your affections so fleeting?”

Mina laughed, a floating and lovely sound, and left the window to look him over.

“That is my favorite day dress, don’t get anything on it. Though I suppose it doesn’t matter now.”

Will didn’t dignify that with a response. His father’s influence was such that he felt ridiculous in her beautiful dresses, though the maids all assured him that he wore them with the same grace and charm as his sister. Still, he couldn’t imagine continuing this farce for long. According to his father, he wouldn’t have to.

The coach rolled to a stop and Mina ordered the servants to start loading her trunks. Her new wardrobe was already commissioned, no few pieces presently in her keeping. She was eager to clear out her old gowns to make room and continue the illusion that Will was nothing more than the lovely young lady he seemed.

A part of him wanted to be, the part of him his father had all but gutted him of. He hoped they would be content with him, that he might be able to make a life that was, if not happy, at least a little less miserable than his life here at home. He had amused himself with daydreams that had grown with time, silly imaginings that left him smiling with possibilities despite the fury that would no doubt follow his deceit.
He just wanted to be part of a proper family. He wanted to be useful and important to someone, to have some small trace
of the love his sisters had enjoyed growing up and from their respective spouses.

He would gladly bear the Lecter family's ire if only they would choose to be kind to him in time.

Blake came for him. The moment Will stepped out from Mina's room he caught the scent of an unfamiliar Alpha mingling
with his father's own, overridden by the sharp taint of fear.

Dismayed and frightened, Will hurried after Blake to the receiving room where the two solicitors, the proxy, and his father
were already waiting. His father's wide blue eyes betrayed his stark concern, and Will immediately knew what they had
planned was impossible.

The moment the Alpha proxy turned to face him, startled recognition crossed his handsome features, and he frowned,
knowing without a doubt what they had done.

"Willia, this is Anthony Dimmond, Viscount du Maurier, Hannibal Lecter's cousin and proxy," Lord Reddig said, as if
keeping to manners might somehow prevent the inevitable realization that he was trying to foist an Omega off on them. "My
Lord du Maurier, this is my daughter, Willia Graham."

"Lady Graham," Anthony said, approaching Will's trembling form with the lithe grace of a cat, amusement and wonder
dancing in his blue eyes as he swept Will's hand up for a kiss.

Will managed a small curtsy, averting his gaze, hyper-aware of the way the man's nostrils flared and uncomfortably
certain his own scent was changing in the presence of a virile Alpha youth.

"Gentlemen," Anthony said, addressing the room. "Lady Graham needs some air."

"I will have a servant—"

"I'll take her for a turn about the garden," Anthony said, cutting Lord Reddig off. He subsided with indignant, frightened
fury, but did not protest. Anthony looped Will's arm over his elbow, graced him with a cat-like smile, and escorted him straight
from the house to the garden without saying another word.

Will clutched his arm in a stupor of dread, barely aware of the warm material beneath his spread fingers, but
uncomfortably aware that an Alpha male had hold of him. His pulse raced like mad from it and from the fear that he was
caught. He was sure he was being led out here for some terrible purpose or harsh scolding that would only precede the one his
father would give him.

Instead, Anthony pulled him to a bench within sight of the receiving room windows and settled him there, asking, "Do you
mind if I smoke?"

Not trusting his voice, Will shook his head and directed his gaze at his lap, fidgeting.

"Look here at me, please," Anthony asked, and Will tipped his head up to find the man looking at him intently as he rolled
a cigarette, his blue eyes critical. "You are lovely, Lady Graham. I suppose you hear that quite a lot?"

Will shook his head again, managing, "I am not allowed visitors or visiting."

Anthony chuckled and licked the paper on his cigarette, sealing it tight before lighting it and taking a deep pull. He blew
smoke out, picked a small bit of tobacco from his tongue, and asked, "What game is your father playing at, hm? I had wondered
why he was so beside himself when I showed up. What say you, Lady Graham?"

Will shivered, but did not answer. Every instinct he possessed urged him to throw himself at this man's feet and beg for
mercy, to somehow save himself whatever retribution was to come. But the memory of his father's beatings were stronger than
any instinctive urge and he sat still, caught like a deer at dawn, eyes wide and mouth parted.

Anthony laughed softly, shaking his head. "Did he think he could fool another Alpha with this?" He gestured at Will's
person with his free hand. "It wouldn't make a difference if he hadn't deliberately put to Mr. Stammets that you were a beta
female, but the crux of the issue is he has. So, I suppose the question is, why has your father presented you as your sister?"

Will began to tremble, uncertain how much he knew of that contract or how Mr. Stammets had represented him to the
Lecter family.

"I had wondered when they said your name was Willia," Anthony said, smirking. "I could have sworn the charming minx
I'd seen was named Wilhelmina and answered to Mina, not Willia. Are you twins? You look so much like her it's uncanny."

Will swallowed hard and nodded.
“An Omegan twin,” Anthony mused, busying himself with his cigarette as he thought. “Is there some reason your sister doesn’t want to marry my cousin? Mind you, I can think of a thousand reasons why any sane woman wouldn’t, considering, but Mina surely hasn’t that much knowledge of him, young as she is.”

“Lord Rathmore just settled with our father for her hand,” Will admitted, his voice soft and wavering with nerves. “There was no way to break with him without hard feelings.”

Anthony blew out a cloud of smoke, amused and smiling. “And then along comes Stammets with a decades-old contract and your father has a brilliant idea to settle both?”

Will dropped his gaze again. “He seemed certain it would sort things.”

“Yet, I imagine your father has a very good idea of the man my cousin is,” Anthony said, moving to sit next to Will. He searched Will with jaded blue eyes, looking for some crack in his composure, for something he could use. “Your father dislikes you immensely.”

Will looked off the other direction, baring the long column of his throat as he did so, a combination of movements created to beg clemency and to be left alone, performed by instinct rather than design. “Yes,” he whispered. “Immensely.”

Anthony was silent for a long moment, contemplating. “I have half a mind to go back to Grandfather and have him settle this.”

Will made a low, distressed noise at what that statement conjured—images of Mina dragged unwilling to wed her ducal heir, heartbroken and bereft. Lord Rathmore’s family siding against his father, incensed at the indignity they’d been dealt. His own father blaming him for giving it all away and ruining his plans. Will shuddered to think of what would happen to him.

“Then again, this could be fairly interesting,” Anthony said, more to himself than to Will. “Strictly speaking, your father did not breach the contract. You are capable of bearing an heir so there should be no complaint on that count. Though I do feel somewhat a cad handing you to Hannibal, now that I think of it.”

“Please,” Will managed, turning to him to plead, more terrified of his father than he was of a stranger he’d never met. He went so far as to grasp Anthony’s hand, his blue eyes wide and beseeching. “Please pretend all is well. Then I will be your cousin’s problem to deal with and I will swear you knew nothing!”

That made Anthony laugh, thoroughly amused, and he squeezed Will’s small hand in his. “You fetching little thing! Ah, but they will never believe I did not know. Your father has done you no favors, darling. The moment you set eyes on me your scent changed, and I am but half the Alpha my cousin and grandfather are. You are quite obviously and delightfully an Omega, and there will be no hiding that fact.”

Will all but wilted, sickly thinking of his life to come.

“However, I can claim that I assumed you were, in fact, the one on offer,” Anthony said. “And Mr. Stammets can confirm that, bless his beta heart. With all of the legal aspects put into place the family will be loathe to take action against your father, leaving your sister quite in the clear for Lord Rathmore.”

Will’s relief emerged as a breathless laugh and he tipped his head back, drawing a breath eloquent of delighted release of tension.

“Lord du Maurier,” he said when he could speak at last, his fingers clenching on the large, strong ones in his grip. “I owe you my life, sir!”

Anthony’s blue eyes held an unholy gleam Will was utterly unaware of. Smiling, he said, “I will hold you to that, Lady Graham. Shall we have ourselves a wedding?”

Will, insulated within his own naive experience, nodded vigorously, pleased and relieved he would not have to face his father’s wrath.

He had no idea there could be ever so much worse than his father’s vitriolic hatred awaiting him.

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The ceremony, such as it was, was quick and to the point. Lord Reddig printed Will’s name on the document as Willia M Graham and Will signed his name as he always did. There would be no escape on a technicality on the documents themselves which declared William Graham the proper and legal spouse of Hannibal Lecter via proxy.
The trunks were loaded by the time it was all legally accomplished. The two solicitors took a hired hack back to the Capital to file the paperwork, and Will was bundled into the ducal coach to be taken before His Grace without any fanfare or word of goodbye from his family.

“Have you wrapped your mind around it all?” Anthony inquired, choosing to ride inside the coach with Will instead of alongside it.

“Yes, my Lord,” Will answered, prompting the man to laugh with delight.

“Ah, no, you’re a Marchioness now and my better, Will—may I call you Will? I got the impression that female clothing is not to your taste and you’ve a preference for male address,” he remarked.

Will blushed lightly, fingering the fine dress he’d been given away in. Mina’s favorite no more. “It isn’t precisely not to my liking,” he said. “It is only that it has been soundly disallowed in my father’s house.”

“Disallowed?”

“Yes,” Will said. “Father says a young man must not make a spectacle of himself with color and cut. He says a young man must at all times be serious and attentive to his work and not be distracted by frivolous things.”

Anthony sat and pondered that before venturing, “You are an Omega, Will. Do you have nothing of color in your keeping besides your sister’s wardrobe?”

“No, sir, I have not,” Will answered, blushing. “I have no desire for such things.”

“Is that yourself speaking or your father?”

Will fidgeted, wishing Anthony would not look at him so closely.

“I can assure you that my grandfather will overhaul any deficiencies you arrive with once he accepts you,” Anthony said, making the soft hue of Will’s blush turn a vivid, embarrassed red. “Your father forced you into a rather unconventional lifestyle. I do hope you gleaned enough skills to make our heir a good match.”

“They are more than welcome to send me home,” Will said, appalled at his own temerity but lacking any other recourse. He had no Alpha to guide him and no previous experience to draw from, so he was left to fend for himself.

Anthony laughed and said, “Alas, no. Your father was most insistent on that point. You, my dear, are an unbreakable commitment. Should you fail to meet expectations, you are remanded to His Grace’s custody for disposal as he sees fit.”

Will let out a trembling breath but evinced no surprise.

Anthony’s brows rose at his reaction. “He must truly dislike you indeed to offer such a thing. Perhaps he thinks he has ruined you, forcing you into a male role. I know very few Omegas who live only as full men do. So very few, in fact, that I cannot call any name to mind. Prospects are better for females when it comes to marrying up, I suppose.”

“I was content,” Will said, swallowing hard. His allegiance to his father was so deeply rooted and powerful that he could not speak a word against him. Instead, he wet his lower lip with the tip of his tongue and looked out at the unfamiliar scenery passing by. “I lived as I was told to live by my Alpha. I was content to obey him.”

Anthony snorted, clearly not impressed with this reasoning. “Hannibal is going to chew you up and spit you out.”

Will started, shocked, a sudden bolt of fear rocketing him. He turned his wild eyes to Anthony, who merely smiled at him, and clenched his fingers in the soft folds of Mina’s dress.

“Or, perhaps if you look at him like that,” Anthony remarked, chucking him under the chin. “He may be content to swallow you whole. Ah, don’t be so frightened! There is nothing to be done for it, now. I did, however, have the foresight to ask that insufferable Blake to pack your usual clothing. Considering the colors his face turned, he did as he was bidden.”

“Wh-why would I need such?” Will asked, his voice thready with panic.

“Call it a hunch,” Anthony said, winking at him, and would say no more on the subject.

Hannibal drew in a deep breath of tangy country air and sighed, eyes sweeping closed as a knot of anxiety unraveled inside of him. After nearly a decade, he was home again on the soil of his homeland, riding down familiar roads on his very own horse while a ducal coach rolled along somewhere behind him bearing his trunks and his disgruntled valet.

He caught sight of Hartford House and tapped his stallion’s rump with his crop, clicking his tongue to urge him into a trot. He felt a keen desire to see his grandfather again, the worry for him that Hannibal had suppressed all this time finally rising to
the top. He was no young man anymore, the Duke, and no doubt it was far past time for Hannibal to settle and take over the running of the estate so Grandfather could enjoy his retirement.

Which brought to mind what manner of wife his grandfather had picked from those on offer in Lord Reddig’s household. The Graham daughters were all beautiful, he’d been told; enchantresses with good health and genteel pursuits and no head for harshness.

Which, Hannibal knew too well, meant they were somewhat stupid and easily entertained, but at least physical beauty might make the task of getting an heir less onerous.

A missive had been waiting for him at the port saying Anthony was to marry her by proxy. She would be registered officially as his spouse and the various entitlements would be put into place by the time he arrived home. Hannibal was surprised at their rush, but could only assume some hurry had been in order. Then again, perhaps his grandfather merely wished her to be waiting for him on his return, ready to provide the longed-for children that would keep the Lecters a solid presence among the nobility.

“Or perhaps she is simply unpleasant,” he murmured, frowning softly as he rounded the bend and hit the lane for Hartford House. He found himself searching the place as he rode up, refreshing his memory with its sparkling windows and intricate embellishments. He saw staff milling out front as a coach drew up at the house ahead of him. Someone spotted him, which sent them all into a flurry of activity. He slowed the stallion despite his anticipation, giving them time to prepare for his arrival.

Will was awoken from his broken, uncomfortable slumber by the sudden shift of the coach as they pulled into the drive of the sprawling estate belonging to the Duke of Westvale, commonly known as Hartford House, according to Anthony. He fought not to tremble at the thought that this could be his future home. It was far more stately and vast than his father’s estate. He began to imagine the number of rooms from the number of windows and the amount of staff such a place would require just to keep it livable. That calmed him somewhat, enough to make his breathing even out and his heart slow a touch.

Anthony watched him carefully, amused by his reactions.

“You’re remarkably poised for being so far from your father, Will,” he said, careful not to touch him or startle him in any way, cautious of him as only an Alpha could be.

“Father was insistent I learn to do without him,” Will quietly said. “He said it was unseemly that any person be unable to function without someone else to decide for them. He wanted me to be able to deal well on my own if I managed to outlive him.”

“It isn’t natural for anyone to be on their own,” Anthony said, disapproval tingeing the words. “You will be much more comfortable here, I hope. We’ll see what happens when Lord Clarges arrives. Until then, I am sure you will find grandfather’s presence far more stabilizing than that of your father. The Lecters are one of the oldest Alpha lines in the realm, after all.”

“I am aware of their history, sir,” Will said, blushing.

“Ah, here we are,” Anthony breathed, a sigh of relief leaving him as the coach rolled to a stop. “Brace yourself, it looks as if my cousin has just arrived, rather sooner than we all expected, too.”

Will felt low, stark anticipation and fear blossom in his belly and looked back to find a lone rider heading towards them at a gentle trot, his erect carriage and tight control of his horse unconsciously indicative of great personal power and confidence.

“Shall we?” Anthony urged, amused by his discomfort.

Swallowing hard, Will emerged to a silent audience of Westvale servants turned out in their starched and pristine uniforms, watching him with curious eyes. He felt their interest like the tickle of fingers over his skin, uncomfortable and close.

Their attention, however, was mitigated by the arrival of Will’s husband and, indeed, his own attention shifted to take in the man dismounting before the staff. He felt Anthony at his shoulder, a curious and amused presence watching the both of them.

Hannibal Lecter was nothing like Will had imagined. He was older, far older than Will had thought he might be, which was the only impression he could garner before the travel-dusty and weary man’s amber-bright eyes fastened on him and bloomed fire.
Hannibal locked eyes with the slender, alarmed little Omega next to his cousin, pale but for a rosy tint to their still-round cheeks, wide blue eyes framed in long, curling lashes, head topped with a riot of glossy-dark curls and a sweet scent wafting his way that was a mouthwatering mixture of youth and fertility which momentarily struck Hannibal dumb.

But only momentarily.

“Hannibal,” Anthony said, grinning. “You are just in time for our arrival.”

The staff waited, uneasy and bewildered by the sudden tension even their dulled beta senses could feel, unwilling to insert themselves into an unseemly family matter.

“I should say you are just in time, cousin,” Hannibal said, his critical eyes traveling once again to the undeniably beautiful and delicate little creature now trembling at Anthony’s side. The scent grew stronger when the breeze shifted, bringing him the sweet-hot spice of an unmated Omega that, once discovered, could never be ignored. Glowering, he sharply asked, “Why did you bring that thing here?”

Will flinched, the bottom dropping out from his stomach. He clenched his hands in the folds of his skirt and trembled with the urge to hide.

“Why, for you, cousin,” Anthony said, his grin positively wicked. “May I introduce your new wife?”

The silence was stifling.

It was broken soon enough by Hannibal coldly ordering, “Into the house! Now!”

It was chaos from there.

The servants scattered in every direction, scrambling to get out of the path of their silently-enraged, newly-returned master.

Hannibal grabbed Will by his elbow and bodily hauled him into the house with Anthony a laughing third, shouting over the sound of Will’s distressed cry, “Don’t do any harm, Hannibal!”

“Grandfather!” Hannibal bellowed, dragging the frightened Omega alongside him into the Duke’s office where the elderly Alpha was working, a ferocious frown on his own spare, lean face. Hannibal flung Will hard at the desk and he fell against it, catching himself on his hands, briefly eye-to-eye with the Duke before he jerked back and fell into a deep curtsy.

“Cease your nonsense this instant!” Hannibal said, turning his fierce glare on his calm, unmoved Grandfather. “Would you please explain to me how this has happened?”

Will bit his lower lip, his trembling knees almost refusing to hold him up. It was too much all at once for a boy who had never been in any company other than his father’s and now found himself drowning in the presence of three Alphas at odds.

His Grace’s eyes flicked to Anthony, who moved to take Will’s elbow and deposit him into the chair near his desk where he sat stiff as a board, trying to adjust.

“Hannibal,” His Grace said, his vibrant voice as deep as his grandson’s and filled with the same Alpha power that turned Will’s legs to jelly. “Welcome home.”

“Welcome home?” Hannibal echoed, and laughed without humor. “Welcome home? Grandfather! Please explain to me how your intention to procure a wife from a proper family resulted in Anthony bringing home this...” he gestured at Will and settled for, “mixed abortion of genders?”

The Duke’s gaze hardened on Hannibal, disapproval in every line of his face. He looked at Will, who shivered in the chair but did not shrink. He inwardly retreated from the lash of their anger and Hannibal’s harsh words, fear and hopelessness rolling off of him in waves. The depths of his anxiety agitated all three Alphas in the room even more so than the situation itself. Anthony hovered near him, uncertain what to do but driven to care for an Omega who was in such telling and gut-wrenching distress, even if not one whit of it showed on his impassive, young face.

“Hannibal, you are my heir and a gentleman. Must I remind you to watch how you speak?” the Duke asked, his cold stare enough to bring his grandson’s sharp tongue under some form of control. Taking a deep breath, he pulled the bell cord behind him and they waited in silence for the butler to arrive. When he did, His Grace said, “Mr. Hawkes, I believe Mr. Stammets is still on the premises. Fetch him here, if you please, and have Cook send up tea and cakes.”
“Yes, by all means, let us compound this insanity with tea and cakes,” Hannibal scoffed, pinching the bridge of his noble nose with weary exasperation.

“Anthony,” His Grace said, ignoring him. “I expect you have some explanation for this?”

“I merely did as I was bidden, Grandfather,” Anthony replied, straightening his waistcoat with renewed satisfaction, his hand falling to Will's nape without him being aware of it. “I went to the Reddig household and married Willia Graham in Hannibal's stead, as instructed. I had not thought the fact that Willia is Omegan was of any consequence, as she had been vetted by Mr. Stammets.”

Will trembled under the touch, almost as frightened by the comfort it brought as he was by the tempers of the men around him. His Gift, heightened by his fear, forced him to feel their anger acutely, to instantly understand why Lord Clarges was so angry, why the Duke was impatient, why Anthony was bristling and unpredictable. It was painful to have such clarity and it left him mute in his chair, heedless of anything but the men around him.

“Did you not, indeed?” His Grace softly asked, his cold brown eyes on his other grandson.

“This is outrageous!” Hannibal pointed out, looking from his grandfather to his cousin, his face tight with fury. “You sent word you had married the Earl's _daughter_ who, I am told, is a very fetching creature with dark hair and blue eyes and is the sum of every feminine beauty one could desire!”

Anthony's cat-like grin returned when he said, “I _did_, my dear cousin. I went there and married a very fetching creature with dark hair and blue eyes who is the sum of every feminine beauty one could desire.”

“Anthony,” the Duke said, clear warning in his tone.

“Then perhaps _you_ should take it,” Hannibal suggested, pinning his cousin with his fierce brown gaze, ignoring the pained noise Will made. He did not care what discomfort the Omega was currently in because it was not his concern to tend to it, no matter how its distress dragged at his nerves. There had been an awful and costly mistake and he was determined to set it to rights. He leveled a pointed stare at Anthony's soothing hand and snapped, “It certainly seems to like you well enough!”

“Sit!” the Duke shouted, the lash of his Alpha presence stinging even the stronger of his grandsons. “This is _my_ house _and_ I _will_ be obeyed!”

They sat, Anthony pale-faced and shaken from his cruel humor, reluctantly removing his hand from Will's nape; Hannibal stonily silent and tense but doing as he was told, though his resentment was thick enough to taste.

“Give me the documents,” His Grace ordered, and Anthony offered them from his small satchel, all of them silent while they were thoroughly examined.

Will made himself as small as he could manage, eyes closed and head tipped down in token submission, vibrating with tension that threatened to spill over into tears. He knew better than to expect mercy from any Alpha, but he had hoped in some strange way that life here would be less fearful than facing his father's daily disgust with him. Now all he could wish for was to be home again, hard at work at some menial task given to him by Blake, ignored and largely undisturbed.

“William,” the Duke said, not unkindly. “William, look at me when I speak to you.”

Will looked up, but his eyes stayed unfocused and distant with the blank readiness for retribution that his life at home had trained him for. He had little hope otherwise with three Alphas in the room and all of them varying degrees of angry, the two strongest scents overpowering, deadening Will's senses to anything but dread and his awful, unwanted Gift.

“Yes, your Grace?” he said, his voice so small and soft it was barely better than a whisper.

“I see you signed these documents with your own legal name,” His Grace said, ignoring Hannibal's chuff of disdain. “William? Is that how you choose to be called?”

“Yes, your Grace,” he admitted, having no other recourse. “Will, if it pleases you.”

“And was there some valid reason why your father chose not to send us your sister, Wilhelmina?”

Will swallowed, reluctant to repeat what had been said to him. He wet his lips and stared into the middle distance, offering, “Mina is only just promised to Lord Rathmore. Father could find no reason to break their engagement and engender hard feelings when he had me to spare.”

He felt Hannibal's eyes on him, boring holes into him with their heat. Will nervously turned away, caught between the stark stares of three Alphas with no escape in sight.
“Except that he was in clear breach of contract, the bounder,” Hannibal informed him, glowering at the Omega across from him, vastly annoyed that it lacked the good grace to leave of its own accord.

“Far from it,” His Grace responded. “The contract was that House Reddig would provide a spouse to my heir who was of bearing age to secure the line of succession. Will is an Omega. They are notoriously prone to fertility as well as producing Alphas nearly consistently. There was no stipulation in the contract whatsoever that the spouse be a beta female.”

The Duke fell silent again, looking at what was before him. He finished, stacked the papers in his long, pale fingers, and tidied them before drawing a deep breath. The tea and cakes arrived and were set out by nervous staff keyed to the tension in the room, which they quit as quickly as possible.

“It is difficult for me to think, Anthony, that you did not intend harm to your cousin in this matter,” His Grace said, settling back into his chair to turn his icy gaze on his younger grandson. “Knowing what you know about Hannibal makes it almost impossible to believe otherwise.”

“I did—”

“As you were told, yes, you have already said so,” Hannibal interrupted, fingers drumming a restless rhythm on the wooden arm of his chair. “The question is how do we undo it?”

“There will be no undoing it,” the Duke flatly announced, holding up his hand in a staying gesture before Hannibal could protest. “No, Mr. Buddish has submitted the necessary paperwork and the news will be printed in the papers come morning, as per my arrangements. No, there is no undoing it, Hannibal.”

“I refuse, then,” Hannibal said, his anger transmuted to deadly calm. “I refuse to have it.”

Will shrank slightly into the chair, almost vanishing inside a froth of silk and lace, his stomach a churning lump of self-disgust and sickening fear. Only years of his father’s belittling and beatings kept him from tears of hopelessness; that, and an unyielding streak of pride which stiffened his spine like a steel rod, neither beating nor punishment ever quite able to peel it out of him completely.

The Duke leaned forward and very carefully said, “If you refuse, Hannibal, then you will forfeit your place as my heir.”

Dead silence greeted his remark. Anthony’s gaze shifted quickly from his grandfather to Hannibal, thoughts moiling in his eyes.

“My terms were very clear—return at once to claim your bride, father a son, and secure your inheritance,” His Grace said with deadly calm. “If you defer the spouse I have chosen for you, you defer your place as my heir which, I suppose, is precisely what young Anthony here hopes to have happen.”

“Grandfather!” Anthony protested, shutting his mouth with a snap when the elderly Alpha looked his way yet again. He subsided, meek in the face of his grandfather’s disapproval.

“Are you putting this thing’s interests above the interests of your family, Grandfather?” Hannibal coldly asked, his stare matching the elder Alpha’s. It was clear where he got his temper from as well as his formidable strength of will.

“I am abiding by a contract which you will accept if you wish to one day be Duke of Westvale in my stead,” he said, matching his icy tone. “No one is forcing you to do anything you do not wish to do, Hannibal. The papers are signed, everything is in order. If you reject Will and choose to disgrace the Lecter name for the sake of your own pride, then I would venture to say that you are the one choosing other interests above those of this family. And if that is the case then you cannot be entrusted with either my title or the responsibility for our family at large.”

Hannibal’s mouth thinned into a tight line of displeasure.

Mr. Stammets arrived then, ashen and sweating and hoping not be noticed. He jumped when Mr. Hawkes announced him and immediately fell into a low bow which the Duke ignored.

“I have but one question for you, Mr. Stammets,” he stated. “Is this the child you met and recommended?”

Mr. Stammets took one look at Will and vigorously nodded, saying in a rush, “Yes, your Grace! She most certainly is! I was taken immediately by her modesty and beauty, so becoming in a young lady her age. And her accomplishments, as I have already offered—”

“You may continue to extol its virtues until the cows come home,” Hannibal said, transferring that terrifying stare to him, and pointed at Will’s slender, motionless form with one imperious finger. “That, however, is not a woman. You gave me the wrong one, you imbecile.”
Mr. Stammets paled even more, on the verge of a swoon from fright.

“Mr. Hawkes, take Mr. Stammets to the parlor and get him a brandy, please,” the Duke ordered. “Anthony, go home.”

“Grandfather—”

“Hannibal, go refresh yourself, you’ve had a long trip and your temper is not all I could hope for,” he said, utterly ignoring his other grandson, who skulked from the room without another word. “As for you, Will.”

“Yes, your Grace?” Will responded, some small measure of anxiety abating with one less Alpha in the room.

“Yes, your Grace,” Will responded, roused somewhat from his terrified daze.

Hannibal wrinkled his noble nose at him and snapped, “No better than a boy in a dress! How little this family respects itself!”

With one last telling look at his Grandfather, he quit the room in a simmering temper, leaving Will alone with the aging Alpha.

“What is your preference in address?” His Grace asked, a polite opener for conversation with an unfamiliar Omega.

“Male address is my preference,” Will answered, thinking of how ridiculous that sounded when he was dressed in feminine clothing. “It is how my father raised me.”

His Grace nodded, adding that to his knowledge of Will. His calm effected a returning calm on Will’s part, the shift in his scent from acrid anger to warm age like a fine old book soothing the Omega’s frayed emotions.

“Mr. Graham, then,” he said, careful not to use Will’s married name as yet. “Did you take instruction with your sisters?”

Will hesitated before nodding, admitting in a small but steady voice, “Yes, I have had the same instruction as any Omega of a noble family. It was my mother’s dying wish that I should be educated as such.”

“But it does not interest you?” the Duke prodded, frowning.

“I am not precisely disinterested,” Will said, unwilling to answer with half a truth. “I have merely been born into a household with seven sisters before me who were expected to wed and do their duty. It was never expected I would follow in their footsteps.”

“But you possess the necessary understanding of households to run one from either direction,” His Grace clarified, nodding softly when Will did. “Tell me, Will, do your true talents lie in paths your sisters were not allowed to pursue?”

Will hesitated only slightly before nodding again.

“Well, you are less inclined to the feminine than some Omegan children I have encountered,” the Duke said at last. “But not for lack of charm and you are certainly pleasing overall.”

“I was once told that when it suits me I am more than a competition for my sisters,” Will stammered, flushing with embarrassment to relay the praise that had bolstered him through the entirety of his puberty, a kindness he had hoarded. “I... it simply does not suit me, Your Grace.”

Will straightened a little, hoping he didn’t seem terribly shabby to the man who held his fate in both aristocratic hands.

“Goodness, you are a sight for sore eyes,” he was told, and lifted his gaze in surprise. “Stand up, Mr. Graham, let me look at you.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Will murmured, straightening at once for the aged Alpha before him. His scent was stronger without the others to confuse it, triggering a primal response in Will’s young Omegan body. His eyes dilated and his heart rate jumped. His clothes shrank two sizes too small and the fine hairs all over his body lifted. Faced with an unknown Alpha without others who might stymie him, Will’s entire body seized on survival—ally or flight, and Omegas had always formed alliances through flesh. It was an unaccountable and unknown response that left him bewildered and rather frightened, all of which was immediately conveyed without his meaning it to be.

“A sight for sore eyes, indeed,” the Duke said, a stately and handsome man who must have been very breathtaking in his prime, Will thought now that he had a chance to look at him without fear clawing at his insides. Even now, with his hair gone silver-white with age and his skin lined with experience, he was intimidating and impressive. “Bless your soul, Mr. Graham, your father did you no favors keeping you from polite company. I can nearly taste you from here, my dear.”

“I am... mortified, Your Grace,” Will whispered, blushing furiously, embarrassed. He dropped into another curtsy more to hide his flaming cheeks than to offer respect.
“Nonsense! You’ve nothing to be ashamed of,” the Duke said, shifting to wheel his chair out from behind his desk, his legs hidden behind a light blanket across his lap. “I’m flattered and terribly pleased. A response that strong means you’ll breed well for my grandson.”

Will’s uncertainty stayed him. His confused and raw instincts pushed him to make a submissive gesture, but it ran counter to everything his father had taught him, so he stood there in the center of the room trembling with indecision and growing panic that something was terribly and irrevocably wrong with him.

“Come here, Mr. Graham,” the Duke said, sensing his unease. He brought his wheelchair close to the armchair nearest the tea set and patted the cushion. “Come have a seat. You’ve gone quite pale. I don’t wish to distress you. Your upbringing has been very unusual, indeed.”

Will did as he was told, unable to do anything other than obey an Alpha with such presence. When he sat, he took a soft breath to accustom himself to the Duke’s scent, surprised when the old Alpha gathered his hand up and briskly rubbed his palm with his thumb. It was strangely soothing, as Anthony’s touch had been, and Will relaxed, a shiver running out of him with the gentle motion. His father had but rarely touched him with kindness. Though heavy-handed with his correction, Lord Reddig had been entirely spare with his distant affection to the point that this touch went straight to Will’s starved heart.

“There, there, that’s better, hm?” His Grace said, smiling at him, his sharp teeth bared behind his full beard. “My cousin on my mother’s side was Omegan. He lived entirely as a male, but he was such a nervous little creature. He always said nothing calmed him like a warm touch.”

Will nodded, growing used to the scent of him, making the connection between the elderly Duke and the kindness being shown him.

“It’s a pity you’re so young, Mr. Graham,” the Duke said, pleased when he relaxed. He didn’t stop rubbing Will’s palm, which seemed to be soothing the both of them. “My grandson has twelve years on you. A peculiar, prickly beast, that boy, as you’ve unfortunately discovered for yourself.”

He gazed out of the window, lost in his thoughts, his movements stilling until he simply sat there, Will’s hand wrapped in his.

“Wondrous creatures, Omegas,” he mused, giving Will a warm squeeze. “I’d quite forgotten how comforting it is to be near one. This family has done itself a grave disservice going without for so long.”

Will sensed he was not expected to remain silently attentive, and ventured, “Shall I pour, your Grace?”

“Ah, yes, Will, please,” His Grace said, releasing his hand with another soft squeeze. “Anthony certainly had an agenda bringing you as he did, but as I told my grandson, it is all perfectly legal and binding. I am certain Hannibal will see reason once his temper has had a chance to settle. War has no good effect on anyone and has done nothing to improve his disposition.”

Will poured for them, still trembling, but managing not to spill. He adjusted it to the Duke’s preference and waited for him to take a sip, only then pouring himself a cup. The soothing heat comforted him and helped ease the knot that had formed in his belly. But he couldn’t keep the image of Hannibal from his mind for long, the utter contempt and disgust on his face when he looked at Will. To distract himself, he asked, “Will it matter that I am not as feminine as some Omegas are?”

The Duke studied him, his dark amber eyes assessing. “No, Will. It may serve you well where my grandson is concerned. Perhaps the fewer reminders he has that you are Omegan, the better. He is a peculiar boy.”

Will considered that. With great reluctance, he asked, “Would you still want me to remain? I have no grounds to dissuade you should you send me home, considering I have deceived you.”

“He is the one who deceived us, Will. But would it surprise you if I did want you to remain? Perhaps for selfish reasons,” the Duke admitted, smiling sadly. “Knowing my grandson as I do, I can say with some certainty that he will do his duty by you until you give us an heir, and then he will leave you to your own devices as he pursues his own.”

“Would you still want me to remain?” Will asked, weighing his options.

“Yes, it does,” the Duke said, chuckling. “You will remain here with your children, naturally, and ease me through my dotage with your presence and the joy of little feet pattering through these halls again. It is, perhaps, not an ideal life, but there is a chance for happiness in it which might rival what your life could offer if you remain in your father’s house.”
Will considered it, a thoughtful frown bowing his mouth. What remained for him in his father’s house was not pleasant, if the past eighteen years were anything to judge by. Without Mina there to stand as an inconstant shield between them, Will wasn’t entirely sure he would last another year in his father’s questionable care.

“I have never given much thought to children but I suppose I should like to have one or two,” he said, surprising himself with the truth. “I would have a place here, and your protection.”

“Mine and my grandson’s to follow,” His Grace said, reaching out to pat him again, a compulsive act of calming when confronted by Will’s doubts. “When I do eventually die, he will know where his place is and take it accordingly. He will treat you with the respect and consideration you are due.”

Will absorbed that in silence.

The Duke smiled kindly at him and said, “Finish your tea, Will, and then I will have Mr. Hawkes see you to your room. I am sure you need to rest up some and prepare yourself for supper, as we shall all be in attendance.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Will said, managing a hesitant, uncertain smile. “I should like that very much.”

Chapter 3

There was no instruction, no familiarization when Will was led away, weary and resigned. The butler, Mr. Hawkes, had his orders to take Will straight to the relative safety of his suite and deposit him there and that was precisely what he did. Will moved in his wake, eyes wide and frightened and taking in the vast house, too tired to sort the various scents that vied with those he had already learned.

“Here you are, Mr. Graham. The houseboys have brought your luggage in,” Mr. Hawkes said, opening the door to let him into a lovely suite made up in neutral, pleasant colors, soothing and quiet. “Has your father sent a servant to assist you?”

Will shook his head, cleared his throat, and softly said, “No, he did not. I have never had need of a servant to assist me. I am the youngest child in my family.”

“If I may be so bold, I would like to pick a member of our staff to assist you now that you are here with us,” Hawkes said, giving him a kindly look which brought Will’s uncertain smile to the surface. “Would you prefer female or male?”

Will, vague with too much happening at once, roused himself enough to say, “I would be more comfortable with a male assisting me. My wardrobe is both female and male so it would be more convenient to have someone familiar with such things, if there is any such person who can deal well with an Omega.”

“Oh, of course, you are quite right,” Hawkes said, nodding a little. “I shall send someone up directly to unpack for you while you take some rest. The suite is yours to use as you wish, the washroom is there through that door. The House has all new plumbing the family is quite taken with, I’m told. Please, feel free here. After all, Hartford House is now your home.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, relaxing to be away from any prying, interested eyes.

He retreated to the window and looked out at the grounds, smiling to see the carefully tended gardens and statuary, the small fountains and shade trees beckoning long walks and quiet inspection to sate his boundless curiosity. He was left alone until a short while later when there was a soft knock on the door and a smooth, even voice that called, “May I come in, please?”

“Yes, come in,” he said, moving hastily away from the window and straightening his dress, feeling awkward and fairly caught out.

A man somewhat older than him came in, pleasantly plump and blond and smiling. He had the strange absence of true scent all betas had, lacking any artificial scent that could upset their Alpha employers, but he smelled good all the same, clean and wholesome like laundry drawn in fresh from the line.

“Mr. Graham, I’m James Price,” he said, inclining his head a little, his smile never slipping. “I would prefer you call me Jimmy, as everyone else does.”

“Oh, of course, Jimmy, if that’s what you prefer,” Will said, relaxing in the face of his comfortable manner.

“Mr. Hawkes has informed me you prefer to be called Mr. Graham? And you have need of a valet?” he made it more of a statement than a question, moving to the dressing room to check the status of the trunks. “I’d be more than happy to operate in that capacity if you wouldn’t mind it.”
“Ah, no, please, I... that would be fine,” Will said, his smile hesitant. “I’m afraid I was sent with quite a lot of female clothing but my preference is male, if that is acceptable?”

“Oh, whatever you like, I can work with!” Jimmy’s nose wrinkled on a wide smile and he asked, “Little bit overwhelming isn’t it? All this?”

Will nodded, his smile easing and his shoulders relaxing.

“Well, you’re in good hands with me, Mr. Graham,” Jimmy informed him, opening the nearest trunk and getting to work. “I had the pleasure of working for the Raleighs before being engaged here. Are you familiar with the Raleighs?”

“Oh, yes, I am,” Will said, returning to the window to look out, chasing the curve of hills and trees to the village proper far in the distance. “My father kept company with the Raleighs. I spent several summers with their children when we were very small.”

It had, in fact, been his father’s determination that exposure to other Omegan children was to Will’s detriment and had started the escalating habit of isolating him to cultivate the son he desired rather than the Omega that threatened to emerge unbidden.

“Well I was the personal attendant of Samantha Raleigh,” Jimmy said, blue eyes sparkling.

“Sam?” Will asked, surprised and pleased. “You’re familiar with Omegas, then.”

“Heavens yes!” Jimmy said, deftly plucking his clothing free and shaking out the wrinkles, sorting them according to need. “I was with Samantha from the time when they still went by Sam. It was quite a surprise to the family when they decided to embrace their feminine side; they were always so adamant they be addressed as male. I say it was that Dartson boy, don’t you?”

Will laughed shyly and nodded, saying, “I would say so, considering they’re married now.”

“Such a handsome little devil, that Lord Dartson,” Jimmy commented, drawing things from the trunks with an illusionist’s flair. “I’d have swapped, too, in their place, though Lord Dartson prefers them however they go, be it Sam or Samantha. The two of them spend all their time running about hunting and sporting together, quite in love.”

“He was quite the catch,” Will admitted, put at ease by Jimmy’s chatter and carelessness. It was nice to be close to someone who wasn’t alarmed by or wary of the fact he was an Omega. “I remember when father read the announcement. I was very happy for them both.”

“Well, I’m simply delighted to be in your service, Mr. Graham,” Jimmy said, no artifice just plain good humor and understanding. “I’ll take excellent care of you! Which, speaking of, why don’t I draw you a bath, hm? A good soak can do wonders and I’m sure you’d like to get all that travel dust off of you, wouldn’t you? Such lovely hair you have, Mr. Graham! You must be the envy of your sisters!”

He moved swiftly to the washroom to draw a bath, chattering like a magpie, which suited Will just fine. He had nothing much to say and appreciated a break in the silence and the good intentions it implied. He had a good soak, washing up with a pleasant soap which complimented his own natural scent, and dressed in the clothing Jimmy had chosen for their coming supper. Will had requested the clothing he was used to, hoping to feel less vulnerable in male attire.

“The whole household has been fair chomping at the bit to finally lay eyes on you,” Jimmy confided, deftly helping Will into his underclothes. “Everyone is very excited, you know. It’s been quite some time since they’ve had an Omega marry in. I think His Grace is hoping to get a few little Omegas of the Lecter extraction to offer on the marriage market.”

Will blushed, silently yielding to Jimmy’s sure hand. The man dressed him expertly in snug breeches, smoothing them into his shiny boots. The shirt was one of Will’s more fitted ones, the cinch of his waist emphasized by his jacket drawn tight at the small of his back to compliment the slight curve of his hips. He lacked the full chest of some Omegas, the budding breasts some elitists declared were the distinction of a true Omega, but his own physique was supple and trim enough to lend delicacy to the clothing Jimmy had chosen. The watered silk jacket was dark in color but light in weight, a stark frame for Will’s pale skin and dark curls. Jimmy exchanged Will’s usual knotted neckerchief for his mother’s coral-pink brooch pinned at the throat of his shirt, leaving his neck mostly bared.

“They’ll expect to see you,” Jimmy murmured, adjusting the brooch with a discerning eye. “You understand, of course, as they’re Alphas.”

“Yes, I understand,” Will said, realizing that exposing his throat was going to be his new norm in a household of Alphas. “It’s just very strange to do so.”
“You don’t show your throat?” Jimmy gently inquired, no judgment in his question.

“No, my father dislikes it,” Will said, fingerling the brooch. It was his single memento of his mother and the only piece of jewelry his father had allowed him. “Proper young gentlemen dress accordingly. Bare necks are for ladies and slatterns, he always told me.”

Jimmy’s brows drew together in a slight spasm, but he nodded to put Will at ease and slipped Will’s pocket watch into place, ensuring the chain dangled just so.

“Thank you, Jimmy, for taking care of me.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Jimmy said, beaming. “Now, follow me, okay? We’re heading to the dining room.”

There was no one else anywhere along the way, as if there was a tacit understanding that Will not catch sight of anyone on his path to the dining room.

“Okay, here we are,” Jimmy said, pitching his voice low as he drew to a stop in front of a pair of closed doors where two footman waited at the ready to open up for him. He fussed with Will’s light jacket, brushing imaginary lint from his shoulders before nodding. “You feel alright?”

Will nodded, the sudden strengthening of Alpha scents making him dizzy.

“Deep breaths, okay?” Jimmy urged, smiling in soft understanding. “It’ll be easier as you become accustomed to more Alphas in the future, but this will take some time. Just breathe through it and don’t panic.”

“Yes.”

Will entered to find the Duke at the table and Hannibal at the windows, staring out at the grounds. More footmen were arranged along the wall like furnishings, doing their best to remain unnoticed.

Hannibal turned, the force of him stinging Will like a lash. His fingers clenched so hard his nails bit into his palms, but he forced himself to relax, even as every fiber in his being focused in on the Alpha surveying him. He could feel Hannibal willing him to look up, to meet his gaze so it could be interpreted as a challenge, a good excuse to make his displeasure known.

Hannibal frowned, glaring at the delicate young Omega who refused to look up at him. Someone had dressed him to please, using every artful drape of clothing to display his trim figure, an androgynous beauty in dark watered silk which made the most of his striking blue eyes and dark hair. He was moderately more composed than he had been earlier, but Hannibal could still sense his unease and guessed the cause—up until his arrival the little minx had attached to his father, no doubt using every weapon in his predictably vast arsenal to wheedle what he could from the besotted old codger. Now, however, his Omegan instincts pushed him towards Hannibal, who made no secret of his dislike or refusal to indulge the vapid trivialities of a witless Omega.

“Will, please join us,” His Grace said, waving off Will’s automatic bow. “Hannibal, you as well, please.”

Will moved around to the Duke’s left, causing a baffling ruckus when one of the footmen attempted to seat him even as Will seated himself. He blushed, embarrassed that the duality of his gender caused such confusion among the uncertain staff, aware of Hannibal’s low chortle of mocking laughter.

“I trust you are comfortable in your suite?” Grandfather asked, at the head of the table as was his right.

“The suite is fine, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, seating himself across from Will, scrutinizing the top of Will’s head when the twit stared down at his empty plate. Irritated, he said, “I still find myself astounded that you would allow this creature to sit at your table.”

Will’s head tipped up and Hannibal saw a flash of temper in those blue eyes. He smirked, congratulating himself on unmasking him even a crack.

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“Will is not a creature, Hannibal,” Grandfather said, affronted. “He prefers to be addressed in the masculine and you will respect that, thank you.”

“Ah, but how was I to know?” Hannibal lightly asked, lifting his glass as soon as it was filled. “They are such confused beings, are they not? Unable to decide between male and female on a given day?”

“You would know by asking, my Lord,” Will ventured, his voice the soft velvet of sexless youth, neither deep nor high, simply clear and lovely. He raised his glassy, unfocused blue eyes with a shadow of his prior meekness. “Much as I ask if you are happy to finally be home in the bosom of your family?”
Hannibal laughed, waiting until the footmen had delivered their first course before saying, “I have been nearly a decade in a country not my own, fighting to save the lives of men who fight for the sake of those who cannot be bothered to fight for themselves, and I return to the bosom of my family to find an intruder has been installed in the place meant for my wife.”

He took a taste of the consommé before him, nodded to the hovering footman, and turned his attention to the Omega across from him. He was, tellingly, not attempting to eat. His small shoulders were squared with determination, but his hands remained in his lap and his eyes stayed half-lidded and staring, seeing nothing while giving the impression of attention.

“I wonder what your father was thinking, pulling such a stunt,” Hannibal continued, aware of his grandfather’s growing irritation. “I imagine by now you’ve realized I am not going to roll over and fall dead at your feet, as your father undoubtedly led you to believe? Or are you planning on amassing a small fortune from my grandfather, instead?”

“I will take nothing from your grandfather without his insistence,” Will said, drawing in a deep breath, becoming accustomed to his unwilling husband’s scent. It was strongly earthy with the tinge of anger, but absolutely indicative of primacy of experience and virility. It was difficult for Will not to respond to it, but he did the best he could within the confines of his meager experience.

In this moment of relative ceasefire, he was able to look at the man he’d been thrown at and found himself thinking that Hannibal’s personality quite matched his looks. His resemblance to his grandfather was great, having his same high, stark cheekbones and deep eyes. His mouth, however, was entirely his own, full lips curved in permanent disapproval above a chin that owed allegiance to ancient Greek statuary. Will found him much like a statue of Apollo he had seen as a child—cold beauty, removed and dignified and carved by a masterful, incautious hand. Even his ashen brown hair refused to be out of place with the threat of his displeasure. Every part of Hannibal Lecter’s appearance lent credence to Will’s growing understanding of him. His dignity was his shield, his esteem of self a boot he used to grind those lesser than he to dust. He knew well his own worth and knew well that Will was not of worth.

Will twitched, stung by it all over again, the view of himself through Hannibal’s eyes reopening wounds left by his father’s heavy hand that had barely begun to heal. It was nothing he could control, it simply was. Without meaning to, he found himself echoing Hannibal’s coldness and steely reserve.

“Ah, yes, I suppose you will get nothing from us. Nothing but a match to make any sane person weak with envy, access to a fortune you have had no hand in amassing, and luxury to rival even the King’s lauded concubine,” Hannibal said, irritated when he continued to sit there, placid and calm, giving Hannibal that damnable Omegan stare. Empty-headed, vain little opportunists, the lot of them. “Yet here you sit, unable to hold conversation in polite company, waiting for some gracious Alpha to tell you that everything will turn out just as you wish and you never need worry for any lack. I am unprepared, Grandfather, to be burdened with something so useless and ineffectual.”

“You will moderate your speech, Hannibal,” the Duke warned. “Will is neither a burden nor an inconvenience! He is your spouse and he is here by my decree and you will treat him with the respect he is due!”

“And what respect is that?” Hannibal snapped, by now all of them uncomfortable, down to the footmen. “Tell me, dear grandfather, what feats this confusion has performed to lie so heavily in your esteem? Or did you simply look at him and lose your wits, as he no doubt considers is normal?”

The Duke slammed his hand down onto the table so hard the silverware jumped. Will jumped, too, a distressed noise breaking from him that he tried to bite back. The two Alphas bristled, a contest of wills that had no clear good ending. The Duke won by habit of power rather than strength, saying, “I will not subject Will to your nasty temper, Hannibal. Will, if you please?”

“Your Grace, my Lord,” Will said to them, standing up on shaky legs, trembling as he quit the table and moved towards the doors.

“He’s a lovely young thing and he will make you a beautiful spouse—”

“I don’t want him,” came the clipped, sharp reply, so cutting that Will flinched and hurried his step, his mouth pressing tight to hold back his hurt sound. As the door swung closed behind him, Hannibal clarified, “You said you had chosen my wife. Will is not a woman, Grandfather, or need I point that out? You gave me the wrong one.”

“Hannibal, please see reason—”
“My Lord,” Mr. Hawkes softly said, trying his best to draw Will away from the door where he stood in shocked, wide-eyed silence, straining to hear. “Please, my Lord—”

“If you like him so much then why don’t you take him?” Hannibal suggested, the anger in his voice carrying through to Will’s trembling heart. “Hm? Take him off of my hands before I arrange an accident for him.”

Will gasped in horror and fled, shocked at what he’d heard and heedless of Mr. Hawkes’ well-meaning, soft assurance drifting from behind him that things would be much better come the morning.

But Will knew better than that. His strange Gift of knowing had never been so thoroughly tested as it had this day and it was telling him now that Hannibal meant every word. He wasn’t indifferent to Will, but actively hated him—not for anything he’d done but for what he was. He was not welcome in this house, and everything the Duke had told him now tasted like lies.

There would be no doing one’s duty. There would be no overcoming of Hannibal’s bone-deep contempt for the sake of an heir; in fact, his brain screamed at him to run, to go home, to seek the dubious protection of his father because he was absolutely not safe with Hannibal Lecter and he knew to the very core of himself that this was blatantly, irrefutably true because he could see it as clearly as he could see himself.

“What have I done?” he moaned, curling into the corner of his suite into the smallest ball he could manage, tears rising and overflowing with such force not even Jimmy’s patient, sympathetic soothing could stem them.

Roland Lecter, current Duke of Westvale, sat awake in his bed long after the staff of Hartford House had retired for the night. It was not only age which kept him wakeful, nor mere sleeplessness, but a deep concern whether he was doing the right thing.

Twenty years ago, he had lost his only son and his little granddaughter in an accident that had been entirely avoidable. Hannibal, ten years old at the time, had come to live with him thereafter, quiet and withdrawn and frighteningly intelligent, surpassing most adults in reason except for one area where he would not bend.

Omegas.

Hannibal, whose mother had died delivering him, had grown under the care of his father’s Omegan concubine, a notorious creature even among concubines, and ten years of such tender care had hardened the boy to the worst possible impression of the human race’s blended gender. When one factored in that the entirely avoidable accident which killed Hannibal’s father and sister was the full fault of the Omega who had so thoroughly ruined him, his contempt was more than understandable.

Roland’s thoughts turned to Will Graham, a sweet and intelligent little mite whose father had done him serious harm, one could tell just from seeing him. Jimmy had reported the boy bore unusual scars was skittish as a wild creature, speaking to a life not precisely comfortable before his arrival here. It was apparent that Will had no defense against Alphas and that Hannibal fully intended to intimidate him as much as he humanly could. It was Roland’s fervent hope that the inner steel which had helped Will survive thus far, as well as his youthful adaptability, might help him penetrate Hannibal’s armor deeply enough to make his hard-headed grandson see that there was more to an Omega than tricks and demands.

But he worried. Oh yes, he worried. The direct Lecter line was too thin to leave anything to chance and he wanted this so very, very much.

He delved into his nightstand and withdrew an aged and fading miniature portrait, smiling at the sight of his own young face and that of the older, more somber man next to him.

“He has your features, Charles,” he murmured to the memory of his dearest companion. “He is you in Omegan form, save for his height. You would like him very much, I think.”

He touched the picture, memory replacing the rough texture of paint with warm and soft skin. Though brief and forcibly ended by familial obligations, theirs had been a passionate affair near on madness. Not even time and distance had settled it. They had been unable to enjoy a formal union between them, but had hoped their progeny could someday realize the mingling of their lines—his through his grandson and Charles through one of his own numerous granddaughters. It would please him immensely to see this delicate, Omegan version of himself walk the halls of Hartford House with the full approval of the law to bear sons of the Lecter line.
“Now to convince them this was meant to be,” Roland sighed. “He married once without my approval, now he is married without his own. I will see our blood united, Charles. I swear it.”

Feeling more determined, he rang for his night servant and requested pen and paper. After scrawling instructions, he sealed it from prying eyes and sent it to Jimmy’s capable hands with instructions to be given to Will.

Reassured on that count, the elderly Duke shifted his weary bones in his bed and closed his eyes, thinking with pleasure of what lovely little great-grandchildren he could expect from the union of Hannibal and Will.

The next morning Hannibal avoided the breakfast table in favor of going riding. He was darkly amused that he was so eager to escape the home he had been yearning to return to. But then, nothing in his imagination had prepared him for his grandfather’s choice in spouses.

They had talked, finally, all grandstanding set aside. Grandfather had given him a variety of reasons they should have an Omega in the family and Hannibal had accepted his explanations before giving those of his own—they were fickle, inconstant, scheming little nuisances lacking the brains to save themselves from drowning. It was a wonder the whole lot of them hadn’t died of their own ineptitude.

Will, he was told, was not like that. Nor, he was told, were other Omegas. Hannibal had just been badly exposed and that was all Roland would hear on the subject.

He drew up short when he caught the now-familiar scent of his supposed spouse, a sweet sharpness like well-aged wine and sugary treats, warmly inviting any Alpha with a pulse to come calling.

He scowled, confronted with the interloper himself, dressed for riding in a bleak and frayed black jacket and worn dark breeches, soft kid gloves on his small hands and tiny, cracked but polished riding boots hugging his equally slender legs. It was a wonder they even made them so small. Hannibal peevishly wondered if it was used to having everything specially made to suit its tastes.

Will, to his credit, did not turn or acknowledge Hannibal in any way. He’d been warned by the turn of the wind that his husband had arrived, but he lacked any recourse of escape except the one he was currently saddling.

“Where is the stable boy?” Hannibal demanded by way of greeting, looking around for someone to fetch his stallion’s saddle.

“There is no one here but the two of us,” Will said, his tone even and calm. He checked the girth strap and patted the mare’s rump, willing his pulse to slow. He was achingly aware of those flashing eyes on him and blushed to be so keenly watched.

“Well, who saddled your mount for you?” Hannibal demanded, sourly passing him to reach the tack room and look for his saddle.

“I did, my Lord,” Will said, surprising him so that Hannibal actually snorted a laugh.

“How amusing,” he said, unable to picture it. He hefted his tack down and moved into the stallion’s box, saying, “I should like to see that.”

“I have just finished,” Will said, refusing to engage in verbal sparring, still off-kilter and wary of him from last night. He had, after all, spoken of arranging an accident. It was not so far from what Will’s father had promised him in the aftermath of his perceived infractions. “Perhaps another time.”

“Grandfather insists I get to know you,” Hannibal informed him, expertly dressing his restless stallion despite its help. Will merely stood next to his mount, waiting for a dismissal so he could escape. “He tells me you enjoy sports. He did not, however, inform me that you were in the habit of riding in the morning, as is a habit of my own.”

“I will change to suit, my Lord,” Will said, hoping to please him in that, at least. His absence was a gift he was very happy to give right now, unsettled and frightening as things were. He did not trust his own safety with a man who had everything to gain by hurting him.

“That is precisely the heart of the problem with Omegas,” Hannibal said, disdain dripping from his even, calm voice. “Inconstant as a breeze, flitting to whatever catches your attention next. Colorful little butterflies with the intelligence and purpose to match.”
Will’s mouth thinned, but he wisely stayed quiet. When Hannibal looked over the stallion’s back at him, he looked away, doing his best to appear meek, to give him no reason to find fault.

“Do you think yourself handsome, Will? Pretty, perhaps? It must be upsetting to realize you are not as pretty as you think you are,” Hannibal informed him, the coy glances aside not fooling him in the least. "When I was told I had a wife waiting for me, I did not expect someone so particularly plain as you."

“Of course, my Lord,” Will said, mortified. He never thought himself pretty or anything close, though he had wondered once the staff made over him whenever he was dressed in Mina’s clothing. He had looked in the mirror to see if there was something there they found which he did not, but it was the same face staring back at him, same blue eyes and pale skin, an agreeable combination in sum that hardly rescued him from being passable in his own eyes. His husband’s assessment of his appearance merely piled wood onto the fire of his self-doubt and he averted his face, trying not to offend.

Hannibal finished gearing his mount and led the stallion out into the strengthening sunlight, telling him, “You’ll ride with me until I approve of your seat. I won’t have you ruining the ducal stable with ineptitude.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Will said, apparently one of only two answers he was capable of speaking.

Hannibal turned to give his slender spouse a leg-up, but Will was already up in his saddle, seated comfortably with the reins in a soft grip and his crop angled over his thigh. Hannibal huffed, irritated that he’d intended to assist it and grimly thinking that it must assume he was already becoming addled by it.

He swung up easily and took up the reins, guiding the stallion out to the park and onto the worn, dirt lane where the sun was beginning to spread its glory. He wanted to have a look at the village and see what changes had come in his absence, something he’d intended to do while alone.

When Hannibal chanced to look back, he saw Will looking at the tree line, handling his mount with easy grace and care, lids half lowered against the slight wind that tossed his long curls around his head in a flurry. He rode well, Hannibal could give him that, and he wasn’t an incessant talker. In fact, he’d barely said more than two words, riding near silently behind Hannibal with his blue eyes restlessly searching, though for what Hannibal couldn’t hazard a guess. Escape, maybe. He hoped so. If his unwanted spouse fled and got himself killed, it would make things so much easier.

“Are you afraid to ride alongside me or is riding behind some type of subservient Omegan nonsense?” he asked, irritated for no other reason than he was spoiling for an argument.

He glanced over at Will, who looked the opposite direction, the pale column of his throat flashing in the morning light. It was a delicate throat, as far as throats go, and Hannibal found himself straining to catch his scent. Irritated by it, he pressed, “Well?”

Will wordlessly nudged his horse up abreast of him, keeping his head angled down, turned away, unable to make himself look up at the man who looked back with such open and impatient contempt. It burned him like a brand to feel such blatant disapproval from the Alpha who had so much control over him and his impulses were in a frenzy of overdrive, pushing him to submit, to pay obeisance, to please him in any way possible because the alternative was something he simply couldn’t control. This was tempered by his fear, by his knowledge that Hannibal was capable of disposing of him for his own aims, but even that could not overcome biology or his father’s dire warning to do anything his husband asked of him.

“What did you scheme with Anthony to land yourself here, hm?” Hannibal asked, wondering with irritation if he was going to be forced to look at the back of the little twit’s empty head the whole time.

“There was no scheming, my Lord,” Will answered, his tone neutral and soft. “My father acted according to the terms of the contract.”

Hannibal laughed, a short bark of humorless noise that made Will start slightly in his saddle. When the man looked back at him, Will looked away again, not sure if he could withstand another attack on his looks so soon.

At first, Hannibal thought Will was avoiding his gaze, but when he did it continuously he realized he was doing something else entirely—flashing his throat in an age-old Omegan ploy to inspire an instinctive Alpha reaction.

Had Will any idea of such things he still wouldn’t have been stupid enough to attempt them. He was simply doing his best to remain unobtrusive and polite in Hannibal’s company, tuning him out as best he could to glean some small enjoyment out of his morning ride. Assuming he was as good as invisible to Hannibal, when he saw a rabbit at the edge of the tree line start to
groom its face in the morning light, he felt safe enough to smile a little in response, his soft laughter husky and unintentionally seductive.

Hannibal glowered at him. “Such naive innocence, Will. Is it difficult to summon in times such as these?”

Bewildered, Will skated a glance his way, unsure what he’d managed to do to earn such a strange remark. His lashes swept up in time with the turn of his limpid blue eyes to find his husband staring at him with something Will couldn’t put a name to.

Hannibal could, however, and decided to put a halt to it at once.

“Stop it,” Hannibal sharply said, the biting intensity of his voice startling Will so much his horse sidestepped, sensing his sudden nervous tension. Will’s blue eyes widened, etched with growing fear that only made Hannibal more certain of what he was seeing. Hannibal reined his horse to a stop and seized Will’s slender arm in a tight grip.

Will winced, shocked when Hannibal’s fingers bit into his arm, painful and dangerous. Hannibal shook him until his perfect white teeth rattled, saying in a low growl, “Don’t waste your efforts in trying your Omegan tricks on me! It would take a powerful imagination indeed to believe I would ever look at something like you and be ruled by a lust which you cannot even manage to inspire!”

Will made a low, distressed sound that only angered Hannibal further because it goaded him to offer comfort, another one of their helpless tricks. Wiles and lies with the only goal of living like a parasite, useless for anything other than debauchery.

Will had no idea what had provoked this sudden ferocity, but his instincts kicked his Gift into overdrive. He was flooded with the urge to flee in terror, but Hannibal’s restraining hand wrenching him back and forth prevented it. The only other option was to submit, to cower, to abjectly accept and hope to survive and he did it without meaning to, every word like a blade piercing his soul. He felt like he was pouring out of the holes they left, draining away until his sense of self was replaced by Hannibal’s version of him, startlingly clear and believable when he looked at himself through Hannibal’s angry amber eyes.

“Creatures like you are repulsive,” Hannibal said, his careful, low tone making the impact of his words all the more harmful, flung as they were into Will’s open and malleable mind, absorbed by his Gift and sharpened by it. “Vain and empty-headed and thinking all you need to do to be comfortable in life is to seduce your way into someone else’s. Stupid, silly creatures no better than children, falling to tears at a sharp word and helpless in the face of even the most simplistic of troubles. It’s sickening.”

Heart thrumming with the panicked need to submit or escape, one, instinct overcame all sense of self and Will quietly sobbed, “Alpha,” helplessly bonding to the man before him in frightened self-defense, a last-ditch, desperate effort to deflect perceived deadly intent.

Hannibal curled his lip at him, finding his theatrics repugnant. He didn’t let go of Will so much as give him a shove that nearly unseated him. Will’s death grip on his pommel kept him upright. His blue eyes were huge and swimming with mingled fear and horror, but mostly shame at his rejection, the denial of something so deeply ingrained in him that he couldn’t quite process the negating of it.

“Omegas,” Hannibal said, disgusted, looking away as if he couldn’t bear the sight of his young spouse trembling beside him. “Weak and needy and only good for whorehouses.”

He glanced back down at Will, completely unmoved by the devastation on Will’s face and the terrible understanding that came with it. Unable to resist twisting the proverbial knife, he murmured, “Your father should have sold you to a brothel, Will. Your nature would be much better served there.”

Will didn’t follow when Hannibal spurred his horse ahead, but his tear-filled blue eyes followed his erect, dignified carriage as he rode off towards the village. His Gift and the bond pressed those words on him, and for the longest time he sat there atop his mount, the tears in his eyes slowly drying as he critically examined what Hannibal had said to him. His urgent terror drew back like a wave, looming over him and waiting to crash again, sucking away what his secret heart had told him was true about himself and leaving only something wretched and hateful in its place. The terrified bond he’d formed to Hannibal left Will open and vulnerable to his preferences over and above that of his strange Gift.

It was an Omega’s place, after all, to be all their Alpha desired.

And Hannibal Lecter desired him to be absent, if not simply dead, reinforcing those lessons his father had taught him so painfully and so clearly.
Trembling, Will closed his eyes against the beautiful day, feeling Hannibal’s esteem settle on him like a heavy, dragging cloak, rendering his talents meaningless, his thoughts pointless.

Plain and unneeded, burning with shame at the sliver of hope he’d had the gall to invest in this marriage, Will turned the horse around and headed back to the house, feeling the very definition of repulsive that Hannibal had so callously called him.

Chapter 4

“Your Grace, Mr. Graham will not be joining the family for dinner tonight,” Mr. Hawkes somberly said. “Mr. Price says he is taken somewhat ill and out of sorts.”

“Out of sorts?” Hannibal blandly echoed, disgusted. He waved Hawkes away, telling him, “No matter, he is contrary to good appetite.”

“Send him up a tray, please, Mr. Hawkes,” Roland said, settling to eat. “I had hoped to have a better meal this evening than last, but that is not to be.”

“Thank that overly dramatic Omega you married me off to,” Hannibal said, attacking his plate with more gusto than he actually felt. “Pouting in his room, no doubt.”

“He has little reason to be in your presence when you behave so terribly towards him,” Roland pointed out. “You have never in your life been so rude to another. That is hardly the conduct of a gentleman.”

“There is no reason to be polite to an Omega, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, leveling a hard look at the old Duke. “It only encourages them to take advantage. Besides which, they haven’t the capacity to remember anything for very long that is unpleasant to them. If he’s even half as brainless as others I’ve met, he’ll forget we’re married by morning and my problem will be solved. And good riddance to bad rubbish, I say.”

“That is more unkind than you are wont to be,” Roland remarked, eyeing his grandson. “I had imagined the war would make you more sympathetic rather than less so.”

Hannibal scowled, focusing on his food, though he hardly tasted it. He had spent an altogether unsatisfying afternoon avoiding the house and his grandfather’s potential displeasure only to return and find that his pretend-spouse had retreated immediately to his suite without a word to anyone. He couldn’t decide what irritated him more, the fact that he’d avoided the house all day for nothing or the fact that Will hadn’t run to his grandfather to tell tales as Hannibal had assumed he would.

“Flighty little thing,” he complained under his breath. Will had probably forgotten all about it already and gone back to his room to play dress up. “Why is he dressed in male clothing now?”

Grandfather did not react to this apparent and strange change of subject. Instead, he told him, “Will prefers male clothing. Apparently, his father armed him in his twin’s clothing and sent him along with that. Anthony, fortunately, requested of the staff that they also pack Will’s usual clothing so he could be more comfortable.”

Hannibal scowled, recalling the shabby riding clothes he’d seen earlier in the day. “It will cost a fortune to dress him.”

Roland did not betray himself with a smile, merely said, “He is very small. He will not cost all that much to outfit properly.”

“His clothing at supper was not that worn,” Hannibal said, glaring at his plate as if it had some hand in things.

“Mr. Price has informed me Will’s formal clothing has had little use,” Roland told him, though he did not mention what else Jimmy had said about Will’s threadbare and pitiful wardrobe. “I have asked for Mr. Avery to come at the end of the week to measure and fit him.”

“Already indulging him, Grandfather?” Hannibal asked, his tone nasty. “Don’t think to spoil him. I’m not keeping him.”

“I believe you are, and I will do as I please with Will,” Roland said, unperturbed. “It costs nothing to be kind, Hannibal.”

“It does with Omegas,” Hannibal darkly said.

“Hannibal, you cannot afford to reject him,” Grandfather said, nearing the end of his patience with his stubborn grandson. “Even the lure of being a Duchess would not be enough to tempt any good family into marrying with ours!”

“And why is that, pray tell?” Hannibal bit out, annoyed. “Remember, Grandfather, I have been near a decade away from home.”
“Yes, and in that decade there has been much speculation about poor Melinda’s tragic end,” he was told, and Hannibal stilled at the mention of her name. Sighing softly, disliking the pain he caused his dear grandson, Roland said, “You fled to the front the day she died, Hannibal. You did not even stay for the funeral.”

“I had little reason to,” Hannibal said, returning to his meal with such stiff dignity it was almost painful to witness. “She was already gone.”

“According to Society gossips, you had every reason to leave,” Roland said, sipping his wine with caution. “And your hasty lent credence to their supposition. It is generally accepted, Hannibal, that you are the cause of Melinda’s death.”

Hannibal abruptly stiffened and looked away, a muscle in his jaw jumping with tension.

“Despite my attempts to handle the situation quietly, the rumors still abound and they have greatly limited your potential matches,” Grandfather said, firm with him now. “We are lucky House Reddig was contractually obligated to provide you with Will! You have precious few prospects otherwise! Had you not married so hastily to avoid it in the first place, you—”

“You and that damned contract,” Hannibal said, shaking his head. “It plagued me then and it plagues me now! I will not deal with him, Grandfather, necessary evil or not, and you would do well not to press the matter.”

In the face of his rising and unpredictable temper, Roland quite wisely did not continue. They spoke instead of the changes in the village and the future of Hartford House, all while avoiding the inevitable need for another generation to be added to the line of succession.

Pleading weariness, grandfather forewent after-dinner brandy and retired to his room, sending for Jimmy with near immediacy.

The pleasant and bright young man arrived in due time, all smiles as was usual for him and absolutely delighted to help however he could.

“How is Will?” Roland asked without preamble. He had very specifically assigned Jimmy to Will in the full knowledge that he would inform him of Will’s needs without sacrificing discretion.

Jimmy hesitated, cocking his head slightly and looking off to the side as he searched for words. “Your Grace, he’s… grieving, I think would be the best word.”

“Did he tell you what happened?”

“No, your Grace,” Jimmy said. “He went out riding this morning and came back rather sooner than I expected, white as a ghost and refusing to say anything. He went straight up to his suite and hasn’t come out since.”

Roland heaved a sigh and said, “Hannibal rides in the mornings.”

“I had no idea, your Grace, else I would have dissuaded Mr. Graham,” Jimmy said.

“It was no fault of yours or his,” Roland said, scowling at the unpleasantness that occurred with every interaction of his grandson with his spouse. “Did he eat?”

“I could only get him to eat a little,” Jimmy said, wringing his hands. “Your Grace, I hesitate to say it but I believe Will was more mistreated at his father’s house than we knew.”

“Mistreated?” Roland echoed, eyes sharpening. “In what way?”

“I have no desire to betray his confidence, your Grace,” Jimmy said, ever vigilant of his charge, which was why Roland had chosen him. “Just please understand that he was neglected to an alarming degree and dealt with far more harshly than any child his age I’ve ever met, especially considering his family’s position.”

Roland heaved a sigh, fondly saying, “So in other words, Jimmy, do my best to keep Hannibal’s sharp tongue between his teeth?”

“I would never presume—”

Roland waved away his apologies, “Presume, Jimmy. Always presume. I want no further harm coming to Will here. I do, however, want a great-grandchild sooner rather than later.”

“Yes, your Grace,” Jimmy said, nodding. “I received your message, of course. Would you like me to talk to him tonight?”

“I think you’d better,” Roland said. “Hannibal is an Alpha in the end. It should take very little to fan a flame between them.”

“Very well, your Grace, I’ll see what I can do,” Jimmy said, and quit the room when Roland nodded at him.
He only hoped it went as he wished and not as he knew it could go, given Hannibal’s terrible temper. All he could do now was wait.

Will was hardly aware of the time when Jimmy came to dress him for bed. He was surprised to see his valet arrive and even more surprised by the darkness beyond the windows.

“His Grace has asked me to discuss something with you.”

Will struggled to pay attention to Jimmy speaking as he was dressed for bed. He’d been fighting a strange numbness all day that had eventually overtaken him. Now that it had, he wished he’d given in earlier because it certainly felt better than the raw, aching disgrace of his own personal truth that everything his father had said about him was true.

“Mr. Graham?”

“I’m sorry, Jimmy, what?” he asked, his voice faint.

“I said His Grace has asked me to discuss something with you,” Jimmy repeated, helping Will into a pair of light linen pants he preferred to sleep in. “It’s rather personal so I want you to know it’s alright to be embarrassed, okay?”

Will’s stomach clenched in response, empty and tight.

“Okay, so, here, have a seat,” Jimmy said, settling Will on his bed and sitting next to him.

“So, has your father ever talked to you about intimacy?”

Will’s cheeks bloomed with heat and he shook his head, speechless with shock and embarrassment.

“I figured not,” Jimmy said, sympathetic. “Well, let me give you a little crash course, okay? So, you know about Alphas and how Omegas are made to fit them?”

Will nodded. He was vague on the details but figured he knew enough to get by.

“Well, the truth of the matter is, an Alpha finds it rather difficult to resist an Omega under certain circumstances, especially one like yourself, unmated and near your first heat,” Jimmy said, his easy manner of speaking keeping things from being too painfully upsetting. “What His Grace would like, Mr. Graham, is for you to go to his grandson and let Nature take her course, so to speak.”

Will blinked. “What?”

“His Grace wants you to do everything you can to get Hannibal to claim you,” Jimmy said, squeezing his hand in something like sympathy. “He’s going by the Once Bitten law and all, hoping his grandson will mark you and settle after the fact.”

“Hannibal hates me, Jimmy,” Will said, his voice cracking when he thought of the things Hannibal had said to him. He hadn’t spoken of it to anyone, refusing to confess to how unacceptable he honestly was, but he was willing to say that much.

“But I don’t know what to do!” Will said, anguished, heart pounding at even the idea of what it meant.

“Just… let Nature take her course,” Jimmy said, patting his shoulder gently. He looked like he didn’t believe a word he was saying and that only made Will’s stomach plunge harder.

Will swallowed hard, his gaze drifting to the door. He couldn’t imagine Hannibal ever looking at him with anything other than disgust. Yet, he clearly recalled how his father enjoyed humiliating him, took no little relish in causing him pain. Surely after his show of force this morning, such an overture on Will’s part would elicit a similar reaction. Perhaps a humiliating, painful coupling would be preferable to Hannibal, a suitable substitute for the kindness and closeness Will had so stupidly dreamed he might find here.

“Just… try,” Jimmy said, gentle with him as if he might shatter like a teacup dropped on the floor. “It’s all he asks.”

“I can hardly deny the request of a Duke,” Will said, the words thready with fear, a fine tremble coursing through him.

Bracing himself, Will got to his feet and slowly made his way to meet his fate.
Hannibal had no sooner settled into an armchair before the fireplace in his room with a snifter of brandy and a good book than he heard a soft knock on his door.

Eyes narrowing, he put the book down and called, “Enter.”

A pale, small form moved quietly into his room in a waft of sweet scent.

It was Will. Of course it was Will.

Hannibal’s mouth curled in sardonic humor when he saw him, every Omegan aspect of him working overtime to enhance his appeal. He was wearing only a pair of linen pants that exposed the slender sweep of his belly and the hollows of his hip bones. His arms were crossed in front of him, hands clasped at his shoulders with his head down in a mockery of shyness. Hannibal could see faint lines on his skin, shinier than the white skin around them, but could not make sense of them in the shadows.

“What do you want?” he asked, though he knew. Of course he knew. It had occurred to Will at long last that if he consummated their marriage then Hannibal couldn’t have it annulled or otherwise be rid of him without a lengthy, embarrassing scandal.

Will took a few steps forward, toes curling with nerves, white limbs shaking as he moved into the firelight, even the scent of him working towards seduction despite its underlying tang of fear. Indeed, the tang of fear was only a spice, making his sweet scent more alluring.

Hannibal laughed, tapering to a sigh, watching Will’s blue eyes chase the room from corner to corner, anywhere and everywhere but at the man he’d come to bed.

“I already told you I despise what you are,” Hannibal murmured, watching a shudder course through him that was eloquent of shame. It pleased him to see it, atonement for being what he was, mortification. “Yet here you are, unable to resist your nature, armed and ready with Omegan wiles to do what you creatures do best.”

Will’s hands fisted at his shoulders. He swallowed hard but said nothing. Hannibal could scent the faint salt of his unshed tears and felt a sudden desire to shake them free, to sharpen the smell of fear and panic riding beneath his desperation.

“What do you plan to do, Will? Strip before me and hope I’ll be overcome? Trust in your deceitful nature and pray for the best? My grandfather contracted yours for a wife. Instead he gives me you—a construct of meager appeal housing a vapid, empty mind and a lack of true purpose outside of getting bedded. I want a partner in life, not something else that demands more of my attention than I can spare.”

Will hung his head and softly offered, “I can give you an heir—”

“I don’t want one from you,” Hannibal quickly overrode him, leaning forward in his chair to scrutinize his trembling spouse. “I cannot, in fact, think of anything I want less than the possibility of you giving me something exactly like yourself, Will. Ruled by heats and impulses, needing an Alpha for every little decision, unable and unwilling to lift a hand to save itself because its very nature requires its dependence on something stronger and better than itself. I’d feel compelled to drown it at birth rather than sentence it to live in such a demeaning and debasing way.”

Will flinched, arms dropping to cross protectively over his belly as if Hannibal’s threat might somehow be heard within by a child yet undreamed of.

“Your father should have been so kind,” Hannibal told him, and turned his attention back to the fire, dimly aware that his anger was making him much crueler than he had a right to be. “You are vile to me, disgusting. Get out. Out of my sight. Out of my house. Out.”

There was a soft, near soundless whisper of feet on the carpet, the mute thud of footsteps pattering lightly over the wooden floor and the careful, quiet click of the door closing.

Hannibal looked back at the space where he’d been and drew in a breath damp with his spouse’s salty tears. Even he could admit he’d been much harsher than he should have been considering Will’s tender age, but the hard, ugly coil of resentment inside of him refused to be sorry for it.

He reached for the brandy bottle and poured a steeper drink, staring into the fire with sightless eyes, his thoughts on his father’s concubine and how thoroughly she had destroyed his entire life, as easily and thoughtlessly as Will would if given his way.
He tossed back his drink and grimly imagined how different his world would be if there were no such things as revolting Omegas.

“My Lord, His Grace wishes to see you immediately.”

It wasn’t the first thing Hannibal wished to hear in the morning, but he wasn’t surprised. Will had probably fled directly to Grandfather last night, eager to bear tales of Hannibal’s cruelty.

“Is he up already?” Hannibal asked, flinging back the covers and emerging to the cool air while Berger stirred up the fire. He stretched, yawning, brushing his hair back from his face.

“He is, my Lord,” Berger said. “The shaving water is ready.”

“Thank you, Berger, I’ll do it myself,” Hannibal said, already annoyed that his day would be so disturbed. This had not been the homecoming he’d wanted, and it irritated him that the Omega was causing friction in his family. If only they’d done the sensible thing and chosen a wife for him, a proper wife.

Even as a grandson and heir, Hannibal was not at liberty to keep his grandfather waiting. He made short work of shaving, bathing and dressing and headed down to his grandfather’s study, unconsciously seeking the sweet scent of his spouse, only aware of what he was doing when he realized it was particularly absent.

He knocked and entered when Grandfather called out. Without preamble, he seated himself in front of his grandfather’s desk and blandly said, “Berger informs me you wish to speak with me.”

Roland was pale with quiet fury, something Hannibal hadn’t seen since he’d been very young and his father had managed to incense him. He pushed a paper across his desk to Hannibal, who took it up with a frown to peruse it.

“What on earth is this, Grandfather?” he asked, growing livid when he read the contents, which gave full and legal ownership of Hartford House to none other than Will Graham unless and until there was an Alpha male child born of their union.

“Incentive,” Roland answered, his voice as hard and sharp as Hannibal’s own, his anger palpable. “After last night, I feel compelled to offer Will some form of compensation for what I’ve done to him.”

“For what he’s done to himself,” Hannibal reminded him, hand tightening on the damning paper. “This cannot be correct, Grandfather! Have you any idea what you’ve written?”

“I am quite aware of what is written there, Hannibal, as I wrote it this morning,” Grandfather said. “If you cannot restrain yourself from ordering your spouse from Hartford House, then I will make a gift of it to him.”

Hannibal stared at him, outraged and disbelieving, then laughing with scorn. “So the little minx ran straight from my bedchamber to yours? Hm? And no doubt listed the various ways in which I rejected him—”

“To the contrary, he was nearly a quarter of the way to his father’s estate before he could be overtaken and returned,” Grandfather said, cold fury sparkling in his amber eyes, “and only said upon hard pressing that he was ordered out of the house and, lacking anywhere else to go, he wished to return to his father.”

Hannibal was silent, wondering how the Omega had managed to yet again pass on a chance to reveal his behavior. “You should have let him,” he said, his voice deceptively soft. “I don’t want him. He is entirely unappealing to me in every respect and I wish to be shed of him.”

“I am the head of this family,” Roland reminded him. “You are my heir and, as such, will do as I tell you for the best of our line. To that end, Hannibal, this agreement stands. Hartford House will belong to William Graham in its entirety. The only way in which you will regain control of this estate is by fathering an Alpha son on him, at which time ownership will revert back to my heir, to you. Those are my terms, and as I am an old man, I expect you should get started rather quickly.”

Hannibal stared at him, aghast that the home which had housed the Lecters from time immemorial would be given part and parcel to that little interloper for no good reason he could see.

“Will Graham is an accepted part of this family, Hannibal,” Roland said, grave and angry. “There will be no annulment, no dissolution of this joining. I want a child of his line; indeed, I want several, including Omegas, and if I have to strip you of Hartford House in order to get them, so be it.”
Hannibal frowned, reining in his temper with difficulty. In a quiet, dangerous voice, he asked, “Why do you persist in this, Grandfather? What manner of spell has he cast that you cannot turn loose of him?”

“I am solely concerned with the continuance of the Lecter line,” Grandfather reminded him. “Will Graham’s breeding is impeccable and he is rich in his own right, or will you turn your nose up at the dowry he arrived with? There is no viable reason not to pursue this except for your petty refusal to see him as the person he is rather than what you perceive him to be.”

Hannibal put the paper back down on the desk, chewing his lower lip with anger, fair trembling with it.

“There is another way I am hopeful you will not insist on,” Grandfather said, taking the paper back.

“And what is that, pray tell? Please don’t underestimate my desire to be rid of that thing, Grandfather.”

“The option, of course, is to make Anthony my heir,” Roland said, freezing Hannibal’s blood in his veins with outrage. “He was your proxy in marriage to Will and would have no qualms becoming Duke of Westvale in my stead. They deal very well together and will, no doubt, make charming children. It would be simple to amend the documents to remove the proxy from them.”

Hannibal just stared at him in disbelief. With quiet shock, he clarified, “So I am either disinherited in part or in full on the whim of an Omega?”

“Hannibal,” Grandfather sharply said, reminding him that, though aged, he was a fierce Alpha in his own right. “Do you believe me so feeble that I lose my sense in the presence of an Omega young enough to be my own great-grandchild? If you cannot bring yourself to understand that Will hasn’t a cruel or manipulative bone in his body, then trust in my judgment!”

“I trust in your judgment, Grandfather,” Hannibal growled, standing and straightening his jacket.

“Then what will you do?”

“Pack,” Hannibal snarled, stalking from the room and shouting over his shoulder, “You can insist that creature have this house, but you cannot insist I stay here! If he stays, then I will go!”

“Hannibal!”

Fuming, Hannibal stomped up the stairs, roaring for Berger to pack his things, his mind a white-hot flare of anger that refused to be swayed.

Chapter 5

Six years later...

Lord Clarges

I am writing to you now in the full understanding that you have formed a new life since last we met. Though I am loathe to intrude upon it, I am compelled to inform you that His Grace, the Duke, your own grandfather, has fallen to ill health, and desires your company as there are issues of estate yet unresolved between you. Please make haste and return to Hartford House at your earliest convenience for his sake.

Sincerely,

Will Graham

Hartford House had not changed any more in six years than it had in the time he’d been away at war, Hannibal found. Not on the outside, at least, save for the cobbled road that now fed in from those that led on to the Capital.

The passing of six years’ time had dulled his anger somewhat, but he still felt uneasy returning. He had not quit this place in any good form and was not proud of how he had behaved since, but he would face what needed to be faced in order to bring peace to his grandfather.

Hannibal sighed, dismounting to walk his horse up the lane towards the house, idly noting the manicured lawn and the thriving growth of saplings planted within the past few years. So, some changes, then. Will would have changed, too, no doubt. Hannibal had heard a stray story of his unwanted spouse from time to time, whispers in ballrooms where he danced with
women who were not his own, tittering and laughter about the unacceptable wife left pining away at Hartford House or, more
scandalously, dealt with the same as Hannibal’s first wife had been. Less often he had heard tales from his cousin, Anthony. He
had written Hannibal first shortly after he’d gone to ask him why he was not in residence at Hartford House, and again some
time later to tell him both grandfather and Will refused to step foot off the grounds, his grandfather due to his failing health
and Will due to the very public disgrace brought on him by Hannibal taking a mistress the moment he landed in the Capital.
Anthony, never one to mince words, had managed to prick his conscience without offending him—a rare talent indeed
considering his traitorous acts—and wrote now only on the occasion it happened to strike him. His own letter of their
grandfather’s declining health had reached Hannibal a scant few days after Will’s had, prompting him to return to the ducal
seat at long last.

Life as the Westvale heir apparent was comfortable, to say the least. Hannibal lived in luxury in the Townhouse during the
Season where he excelled in his medical duties to his fellow elites. He rotated among his other estates to ensure they were
running properly and summere...
He did realize that while he saw the influence of Will Graham in the house, he did not find his scent. There was a distinct lack of Will’s sweet smell, in fact, enough so that he let himself through the shared washroom of their conjoined suites to open the door to Will’s room.

It was there, but faint, like a memory from years before, a cobweb of fragrance clinging here and there. It was strongest at his bed, an indistinct lingering perfume that was hard to trace. Curious, Hannibal moved to the vanity, an item that had served Duchess after Duchess over the course of its lifetime. He expected baubles and pearls, boxes filled with jewelry bought on impulse and quickly abandoned. He found instead a single plain jewelry box with a handful of modest, jeweled pins, each one accompanied by a note of birthday congratulations from Grandfather and nothing else. A silver hairbrush and comb lay neatly to one side, other than that, the vanity was quite empty save for several mysterious glass vials of liquid and the blush-pink brooch Will had worn at their ill-fated supper.

“Grandfather must have put his foot down on that subject,” Hannibal murmured, moving to the dressing room. Instead of the overblown wardrobe he expected, Hannibal found a somber sum of clothing suitable for funerals in its color and lack of embellishment. Hannibal himself was no fop, but even his clothing had more life to it.

“I hate to greet you with correction, my Lord, but you are in the wrong suite.”

Hannibal turned, armed with a frown, his hands clasped behind him as he faced Will Graham after a six-year absence.

He had not spent much time with Will during his failed homecoming six years ago, but even so short an exposure hammered home the realization that Will Graham had changed considerably since. He was taller, still trim even in his layers of disguising clothing, watching Hannibal with unsettling blue eyes that neither flinched nor acquiesced. His dark curls were somewhat tamer, shorter than they had been, and his face had hollowed slightly, his square jaw a perfect foil for the excess of his delicate, full mouth.

He’d lied and called this creature plain once upon a time, not nearly pretty enough to get his way.

Hannibal very much doubted now that there was anything in the world Will Graham could ask for and not receive immediately just by fluttering his ridiculously long eyelashes, and no doubt he well knew it.

“I am the future Duke of Westvale,” Hannibal reminded him, aware that he was testing the air for Will’s scent, still strangely elusive even so close. “Every room in this house is mine.”

He clenched his teeth once he said it, realizing it was not true in the least. Hartford House belonged to Will Graham, no matter who happened to be Duke at the time—at least, until he bore an Alpha son for Hannibal.

Will inclined his head with a slight, wry smile, arms crossed over his chest and pale, small hands tucked out of sight. Hannibal noted with irritation he wore a neckerchief, thick and properly knotted as per the fashion but entirely covering this throat. He had no means or reason to protest or complain, but he felt an instinctive frustration rise at the Omega’s refusal to be seen. Hannibal had never before met one that did not flaunt its neck like a prize, daring any Alpha with strength enough to try laying their mark for all to see.

“The ownership of Hartford House notwithstanding, your grandfather has assured me I have a place here, though I have never claimed it is a permanent one,” Will said, moving to his vanity to slide the brush to one side. It was less a tidying than it was an excuse to give Hannibal his back, though that, too, was a provoking sight. His shoulders had stretched along with his height, but his waist had slimmed even more, all traces of baby-round softness whittled away to leave the clean lines of pure symmetry.

Hannibal was profoundly flustered.

“I assume you are going to remind me that this House is no longer mine?” he asked, recovering enough to deliver the barb with true heat. He saw Will’s face reflected in the mirror, his dark brows drawing down and a soft frown curving his full mouth.

“I have not heard that you forfeited your inheritance, Lord Clarges,” Will said, his gaze lifting only slightly to reach Hannibal’s in the mirror, a fleeting contact lost almost at once. “Your grandfather will be beside himself to hear so.”

Hannibal stared, his own features schooled to hide the resulting bewilderment of that particular statement.

“I am by no means forfeiting my inheritance!” Hannibal said, scrutinizing his slender mate despite himself. “I am speaking of the fact that Hartford House belongs to you! Little though you deserve it!”

Will tensed, a subtle shift of muscles along his shoulders, a slight tightening at Hannibal’s insulted tone.
“Hartford House is the ancestral home of the Lecters,” Will softly said, though his voice was stiff and offended. “I have no intentions of taking that from you, Lord Clarges, but I will not be berated for something which I have had no hand in.”

“Hartford House is yours from turrets to foundations less than three days after your arrival and you expect me to believe you had no hand in it? Ha! The very nerve!” Hannibal huffed, shoulders back and chin tilted slightly, unconsciously highlighting his Alpha qualities in instinctive reaction to Will’s continuing disinterest. “That is why I am here, to discuss things with Grandfather so that we may sort this entire mess. It is nothing you would understand or have any interest in.”

The silence that followed was thick and Hannibal fidgeted, uncomfortable and strangely uneasy with their conversation, as if Will had the intelligence to realize what his return actually meant—find a way to pry Hartford House from his grasping, greedy little hands, finger by finger.

“I am relieved you read the letter and did not burn it out of hand,” Will murmured, tactfully changing the subject, or else losing interest, one. He moved so that Hannibal could no longer see him in the mirror, but still was faced with his shoulders sweeping into his narrow waist and the flare of his coat that served to emphasize rather than disguise the slight curve of his hips.

“And why would I burn it?” Hannibal asked, annoyed that Will would believe him to be so petty when Omegas were notoriously so. “You had never sent a letter even once in six years. I assumed there was some purpose behind it.”

“Well, you’re here, at least,” Will said, turning to face him, his arms crossed again, defensive postures that only served to irritate Hannibal. While he did not expect a warm welcome, he did expect Will to behave as an Omega alone with an Alpha among Alphas. He did expect the usual sort of trembling, wide-eyed excitement he often elicited from courtesans who remained free and willing. He did expect self-aggrandizing chatter meant to endear, the sly looks and coy smiles of a creature that could not help its own nature.

Will watched him, cautious but unaffected, his solemn blue eyes weighty and far older than his smooth face allowed for, trapping a peculiar melancholy out of place in one so young.

“If you would like to change rooms,” Will slowly said, a mocking smile curving his pink mouth, his head tilting slightly to one side as if Hannibal was a bemusing novelty. “Then I will have Jimmy pack my things.”

Hannibal stiffened with affront, mouth pursed in disapproval of his cheek. In a haughty, hard tone, he said, “I came to see if you had gone by now, knowing that I was arriving in order to take my place at last. Imagine my disappointment to find you still here.”

“Imagine,” Will blandly agreed, his white teeth flashing in a wry grin. When he said nothing more, Hannibal’s frown intensified.

“Do you always dress as if about to attend a funeral?” he asked, his amber eyes flicking over Will’s clothing—black coat and black breeches, black knee boots, all dark except for his white shirt and knotted neckerchief. He made Hannibal’s own tastefully embroidered coat seem positively peacock-like in comparison.

Will’s brows rose in mild amusement.

Hannibal found it vastly unsettling.

“Are you trying to insult me, Hannibal?” he asked, sounding ever so faintly disapproving and amused. The sheer gall. “Or are you frightened I’ve spent your fortune on clothing and somehow managed to hide it all from you?”

Hannibal glowered at him, eyes narrowed. He would have said there was some mistake and Will Graham was a beta, but even so faint his scent was undeniably that of an Omega... however little he behaved like one.

“Ah, I apologize,” Will said, feigning understanding of the cause for Hannibal’s sudden, stiff affront. “You would prefer I call you Lord Clarges, would you not? Very well, Lord Clarges. I shall wait downstairs until you are satisfied with the contents of my wardrobe and return to your own suite before I intrude on you in my own again.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort!” Hannibal snapped, flushing in consternation, uncertain how something as diffident in nature and fawningly submissive as an Omega had somehow managed to subtly scold him. “I have no interest at all in your wardrobe, damn you!”

“Of course, my Lord,” Will murmured, watching him with amused, mocking blue eyes.

“Don’t call me that, for the love of the gods!” Hannibal ordered, jerking on his coat to settle it, consumed with the desire to groom himself in the face of Will’s obvious yet elusive disapproval. “The servants will have a field day!”
He realized how silly it sounded the moment it left his mouth, saying something like that to the spouse he’d abandoned six years before and then proceeded to publicly make a fool of in polite Society.

Frustrated and feeling off-center, Hannibal gruffly told him, “Call me by my given name.”

He stalked purposefully towards the door of their shared washroom, bristling at the soft utterance that followed him out.

“Of course, Hannibal…”

Will released a deep, relieved breath when Hannibal left. He slumped against the door, his hand trembling when he lifted it to brush his curls back from his heated forehead.

Seeing Hannibal again after six years was like a punch in the gut. Secluded here at Hartford House with only the aging Duke, Anthony, and beta servants for regular company, Will had forgotten what an Alpha in his prime could do to him. Rather, what this particular Alpha in his prime could do, as he had no such issue with Anthony Dimmond during his visits.

But then, he hadn’t bonded to Anthony as he had to Hannibal, and there wasn’t a day that passed that he didn’t wish otherwise.

Hannibal loomed behind his closed eyes, tall and fit and watching him with the stoic, effortless beauty of an uncaring god. Just the thought of him keyed Will’s nerves tightly. His pulse raced, his nostrils flaring to gather the heavy scent of him. His heart pounded and he thanked every god he could recall that the scent blocking products and repressive tonics he took were able to hide the extent of Hannibal’s effect on him. He could only imagine how the haughty Lord Clarges would react had he any inkling of how Will’s instincts responded to his nearness.

“He won’t stay,” Will assured himself, moving to sit at the vanity before his weak knees gave out on him. He propped his elbow up and dropped his head into his palm, drawing another breath that was easier than before as Hannibal’s scent faded.

“He’ll leave. He’ll settle things with His Grace and he’ll leave…”

Six years ago, he’d been cautiously told by Jimmy that his husband had packed his things and gone. Will had been stricken with guilt, anxiety, and panic, knowing he was the cause of his defection, frantic at the thought that he would be held accountable for breaking the Lecter family’s main line with his unsuitable presence. The sudden and absolute loss of the Alpha he had instinctively bonded to had devastating consequences for Will, who was left picking up the scattered, shattered pieces of himself without the ability to put them back together again.

So he’d adapted, as Omegas were designed to do. He’d adapted to Hannibal’s perspective, which Will’s Gift had made his own. He’d adapted to the Alpha desires he had bonded with in a moment of duress and emotional distress. He’d sent Mina’s wardrobe back to their father and refused the tailor’s recommendations for soft colors and light fabrics. He’d ordered the bare minimum, opting to live like a renunciate, rejecting anything his nature found pleasing. His place in and ownership of Hartford House had been bought with a lie, and Will was determined they shouldn’t suffer for it. He’d taken charge of the house and estate to spare Roland and, after a few short months of oversight, His Grace had been content to leave things in his hands. For the past six years Will had lived like a ghost in this house, barely seen, rarely heard, and ruthlessly efficient at making the estate run like clockwork.

Now it was all about to end, he knew. Hannibal had returned and he was no more inclined to accept Will now than he’d been six years ago, nor was Roland any more inclined to pack Will off back to his father and pretend the whole sordid event had never taken place.

“Mr. Graham?”

“Yes, Jimmy?” he asked, looking up to find his valet peeking in the door at him. By all rights he should be addressed by his title, but Will refused it. His insistence that they call him “Will” had been met with scandalized refusal but “Mr. Graham” did well enough for everyone.

“Was that him?” Jimmy mouthed, pointing towards the washroom door.

Will cracked a weary smile and nodded, softly saying, “As agreeable as ever, I’m afraid. He was checking to make sure I hadn’t invested his inheritance in my wardrobe.”

Jimmy pulled a face, knowing better than anyone how spare Will was with regards to himself.

“Has something happened?” Will asked. “Or were you just curious?”
“Well, you know me,” Jimmy chuckled, waving his hand. “But, I’m actually here because Lord du Maurier is downstairs asking after you.”

“His timing is uncanny,” Will said, not surprised in the least. “I doubt Lord Clarges will be glad to see him again. Thank you, Jimmy, I’ll be down directly.”

Jimmy left with a soft smile and nod, leaving Will alone again.

He looked in the mirror, staring at his own blue eyes. A stranger looked back at him, pale and lifeless and plain. Certainly no match for a future Duke, as he’d been told countless times over the years by overheard gossip repeated below stairs, carried in by the servants who felt the need to defend him against his justified detractors, even if only among themselves.

Sighing, Will pushed to his feet and left, hoping Hannibal was satisfied by what he had found and would keep to his own suite for the time he was here.

Anthony was in the salon, a younger and more amiable companion than Hannibal could hope to be, the resemblance between them less strong now in six years of growing. Will never imagined he could forgive Anthony for his part in what had happened, but he actually found him very agreeable and amusing. The fact that he was an Alpha rarely if ever came up—Will never felt moved to respond to him thanks to his bond to Hannibal, and Anthony had mentioned on more than one occasion that the suppressants made Will a beta male in all but truth. They had become unlikely friends over the years, the close proximity of the Dimmond holdings at Fernhill allowing for fairly frequent visiting during the off-season, though it only went one direction.

“Ah! There you are! I wondered what had happened!” Anthony called, turning with crackling energy, tapping his riding crop against his boot in a rattling rhythm. “You weren’t in your office.”

“I was informed by the servants that Lord Clarges had returned,” Will said, noting the surprise on Anthony’s face. “You didn’t know?”

“No, of course not,” Anthony said, aghast. “I would have gone the other direction if I had. Well, I guess that puts a damper on my plans, then.”

“What plans?” Will asked, idly straightening a pillow on the settee where Anthony must have been sitting before he came down.

“I thought we’d go for a ride,” Anthony said, delighted with himself. “Have Cook pack us a lunch and go fishing? You’ve been cooped up in your office for weeks now. You need a break.”

Will laughed, shaking his head a little.

“Actually,” Anthony said, casting a searching glance at the salon door. “If we hurry, we could get away before Hannibal knows I’m here.”

Will opened his mouth to say he couldn’t possibly escape, then thought better of it when he recalled how Hannibal had spoken to him upstairs. He nodded at Anthony and told him, “Yes, let’s go. He would prefer me not to be here at any rate; I doubt he would complain over the absence of either of us.”

Anthony’s grin widened, his similarity to Hannibal giving Will a pang of discomfit, and he rang vigorously for Hawkes, who appeared as if by magic.

“Lord du Maurier and I will be going on an outing to the dock, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, aware of the butler’s disapproving silence directed Anthony’s way. “If you could ask Mrs. Pimms to make up a basket for us and have my fishing gear packed?”

“Of course, Mr. Graham,” he said, his sonorous voice carrying almost as if he hoped Hannibal or Roland would hear him and come investigate. “My Lord du Maurier, will you stay for dinner?”

“Yes,” Will said for him, and quirked an eyebrow at Anthony’s indignant huff. “If I’m going to get into trouble for this, you’re going to get into trouble with me.”

Anthony’s grin returned in full force. “Partners in crime, then! Yes, I’ll stay, Hawkes. And get a move on, old boy, will you? I want clear of the house before my cousin comes to box my ears. I haven’t danced out of his reach for six years just to be caught now.”

The hamper was brought directly and Will’s horse was brought around, saddled and loaded with his gear bound on its rump. He mounted up and sighed as he settled into the saddle, already feeling the tension of Hannibal’s arrival loosen inside of him. He had few pleasures he rarely partook of and a day at the riverside was one of them.
“So, is there some devastating piece of news you wish to throw on me?” Will asked, giving Anthony an assessing look as they rode at an easy pace towards the estate’s mill.

“What? Why would you ask that?”

“Because you rode over today wanting to take me on a picnic,” Will said, laughing softly, “and take me fishing. The last time you did that you brought me news of Hannibal’s daughter having been born.”

“Ah, yes, that,” Anthony said, shifting uncomfortably, those high Lecter cheekbones stark in the afternoon light but his mouth more that of a Dimmond. “No, nothing so terrible as that.”

“It wasn’t terrible, just...” Will said, troubled by the memory of it. “It was just... informative of my place. I’m glad they both did well and thrive. Hannibal’s mistresses deserve no blame for my situation.”

Anthony frowned his direction, mouth pursing.

“Your sister is becoming quite the talk of Town,” he said, the neutral caution of his voice alarming Will more than the content.

“Which one? I have several sisters,” Will said, though he knew which one. His twin, of course. She had married her Lord Rathmore as planned and in the past six years had behaved with the same outrageous arrogance their father had encouraged in her. When Lord Rathmore had taken a mistress, Mina had publicly thrown a fit and tried to have the poor woman’s house burned down. There was truly no telling what she had done now. The last Will had heard, she was threatening divorce and had taken up with an actor, making no move to hide her own affair.

“Will, honestly,” Anthony scolded, shaking his head. “I saw her weekend last and she asked about you.”

Will felt cold fingers trail down his spine and shivered, wondering if it was his father’s doing.

“Considering she has never once tried to contact you in all these years, I was understandably taken aback,” Anthony went on. “She wanted to know what Hannibal’s plans were in regards to you.”

“She could have asked him herself,” Will said, his voice subdued. “I am sure they have seen much of each other these past six years.”

“Actually, no,” Anthony corrected him, guiding his horse onto the trail down towards the mill. “She was justifiably terrified to go near him considering the part she played in your marriage. They have not once crossed paths that I am aware of. She’s damned near as good at it as I am!”

“I suppose that is for the best,” Will said, thinking of what that meeting would have ended up as. “I cannot imagine how she would react to being called ugly.”

“Ugly?” Anthony asked, laughing. “Why would anyone call your sister ugly?”

“I have always been told my resemblance to Mina is frightening to every detail,” Will said. “Hannibal would find her every bit as unappealing as he finds me.”

Anthony laughed and shot a sideways glance at him, shaking his head. “He is alone in that estimation, Will. What few of my fellows who have seen you think you quite lovely and attractive, with pleasing manners and a faraway sadness that begs relief.”

“You should not associate with such fools,” Will said, dismissing it. “Nor with an Omega, Anthony.”

“Bollocks,” Anthony pronounced it, laughing. “My prospects are being discussed back home and a few Omegas number among them, rare as they are.” He turned his twinkling gaze on Will and winked at him when he happened to look up, saying, “But not a one to compare with you.”

Will laughed, chalking it up to more of Anthony’s ridiculous nonsense.

They rode a ways down the riverside from the mill to a small fishing dock that Roland had ordered built for Will as a birthday present when he found out that Will loved to fish. Will would never cease being grateful to the aging Alpha for all of his many kindnesses, even if most of the affectionate gifts he attempted to lavish on Will were refused.

“Shall we fish first or after?” Anthony asked, swinging down to take the basket from the back of Will’s mount.

“I’d rather fish for a while, unless you’re famished?” Will said, deftly dismounting and loosening the straps which held his fishing gear in place.

“Fishing first, then,” Anthony said, already peeling off his boots and stockings while Will put the poles together and strung them with line. “Are you worried now that he’s back?”
“No,” Will said, focused on finding suitable hooks and sinkers in the modest box Mr. Hawkes had given him to hold his small loose pieces.

“You know this won’t end well,” Anthony said, picking his way barefoot to the patient horses to take their gear off. He hissed when his mare shifted, dancing a cursing jig to avoid his bare toes being stepped on.

Will laughed at his antics, saying, “You should have done that before you took your boots off.”

Anthony scowled at him but finished anyway, piling the gear up in the shade of a nearby tree and letting the horses wander.

“You didn’t say anything,” he said, tired of waiting for Will to address his statement.

“I wasn’t aware you had asked a question,” Will pointed out, finished tying on the hooks, corks and sinkers. There was a small oilcloth packet of side pork to use as bait tucked into the top of the picnic basket and he gathered it up, offering one pole to Anthony to take. “Hannibal has come to claim his place, Anthony. It’s no business of mine how he does so.”

Anthony took the pole and packet, frowning softly as he watched Will strip off his own boots and stockings.

“You could lose everything, Will,” he said, sounding genuinely concerned, “if he convinces Grandfather to allow an annulment. If he doesn’t, Hannibal won’t stop trying, not so long as Hartford House belongs to you.”

“Let’s not speak of unpleasant eventualities,” Will urged him, summoning a smile that was brittle and worn thin. He headed to the dock and plopped down at the end, dangling his bare feet in the water with a sigh.

With no other recourse, Anthony joined him, both of them threading their hooks with bait and leaving more complicated conversations behind them.

3

By the time Hannibal was properly refreshed, stuffed with pastries and tea by his overeager staff, and summarily outfitted in fresh, clean clothing, Grandfather was awake and asking to see him.

Hannibal steeled himself for what was to come, no doubt some awful row like the one they’d had the last time he was home. He dearly loved his grandfather but they were two Alphas cut from the same stubborn cloth and that caused no little friction between them.

He was not prepared, however, to see his grandfather lying frail in his bed, looking haggard and spare and much older than he should.

“Hannibal,” he said, smiling to see his grandson, holding out one trembling hand which Hannibal grasped immediately. “I wasn’t sure you would come.”

“Of course I came, Grandfather,” he said, wondering where all his strength had gone. Then again, six years was nearer a decade than it wasn’t, and Roland had not been young for a very long time. “I had no idea you were so ill. Will should have written me sooner!”

“He wanted to, but I wouldn’t let him,” Roland said, squeezing his fingers. “I had hoped you’d come home on your own.”

Hannibal drew up, scalded and slightly ashamed. He’d thought often of his grandfather once the anger at his machinations had burned out, but his damnable pride had prevented him from reaching out. It had, as always, gotten the better of him in that regard and this was the price of it.

“Hannibal,” Grandfather said, bringing his thoughts back to the present. “I am not well at all these days, my boy. I have no time to dance around subjects or spar with you—I want that child, Hannibal. I want a child to carry on the Lecter line.”

Hannibal stared down at him with wary calculation before telling him, “My mistress is pregnant once more. Should it be a son—”
“I’m not legitimizing your bastard,” Roland snapped, the effort forcing a coughing fit that left him breathing hard. When he had recovered somewhat, he went on with less force to say, “You are very much in danger of losing this estate, Hannibal. All I ask is a child.”

“No, you ask for an Alpha son! With the Omega you foisted off on me,” Hannibal reminded, frowning. “There could be any number of children born before that lauded child! I refuse to be trotted out like a stud to a broodmare!”

“I have changed my arrangement,” Roland said, pointing weakly towards his roll-top desk. “There, on the blotter.”

Hannibal retrieved what he was asking for, reading the elegant, precise handwriting with growing surprise.

Addendum to a Previous Declaration:

Let it be known that the previous Declaration of Ownership of Hartford House is now Amended. As such, Hartford House will no longer belong to William Graham until the time that he bears an Alpha son. From this day, it shall be legally of consequence that on the delivery of any sound, living child of Hannibal Lecter by William Graham, ownership of Hartford House will immediately revert to Hannibal Lecter in its entirety and a legal separation will be filed on his behalf should he so desire. William Graham and his child will remain as guests of Hartford House until the death of Roland Lecter, current Duke of Westvale, after which William Graham’s continued occupancy of Hartford House will be strictly by the invitation of Hannibal Lecter.

All Hannibal needed to do was get Will pregnant and Hartford House would be his again. Rather, would be his upon the child’s first breath in the world, but nothing more than that. No sharing Will’s bed through countless children until meeting that Alpha son requirement, no enforced cohabitation in the misplaced hope a bond would form. Just one child, and once he took his place as the Duke of Westvale, he could see Will thrown out on his ear for his insufferable scheming.

There most certainly had to be a catch.

“All you require is a single pregnancy?” he asked, sure that his grandfather would never be so incautious where he was concerned. “Even if the child was to be female or, gods forbid and strike me dead, an Omega?”

Grandfather nodded unsteadily.

Hannibal reread the document, asking as he did so, “And Will would only remain here until the time of your death?”

Again, Roland nodded, managing to make it infinitely sorrowful.

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Grandfather nodded unsteadily.

Hannibal reread the document, asking as he did so, “And Will would only remain here until the time of your death?”

Again, Roland nodded, managing to make it infinitely sorrowful.

“I have asked far more of him than I have had a right to,” Roland admitted. “He has wasted the best years of his youth shut away in this house with only an old man and your cousin for company. One child is all I ask, and then the both of you can seek whatever design best suits you. But I will have that child, Hannibal, Alpha, beta, or Omega, there will be a Lecter of House Reddig extraction, even if your heir is eventually the bastard get of your shoddy wigeon in the Capital.”

Hannibal took a deep breath. “Does Will know you have contrived to turn him out homeless into the streets the very day you die?”

“No, he does not know,” Roland said. “Nor should you tell him if you have any intentions of making this come about. And I never indicated that Will would be turned out with nothing. I have made provisions for him in my will which Mr. Buddish and the Dimmonds are all very aware of. He will be comfortably settled when my time comes.”

“Yet with a child, Grandfather, there would be no annulment, only this... separation you write of,” Hannibal said, placing the Addendum back where he had found it.

“Separation has never seemed to prevent you from finding affection and companionship where you please,” Roland said, wry humor coloring his voice. “Under these circumstances, it will not keep Will from such, either. You will be shed of him, Hannibal, treasure that he is, and I will have the comfort of his company until death finally claims me.”

“Death will hardly claim you, you stubborn old menace,” Hannibal said with a fond smile. “Stop speaking with such certainty!”

Roland smiled, chuckling softly, his breath rattling in his lungs. He sobered after a moment and said, “If you agree, Hannibal, then sign that document.”

Hannibal frowned, considering all the myriad ways this could backfire on him. As it stood, he would not have control of Hartford House again in his life, not fully. He was a powerful Alpha in his prime and there was a very good chance he could get Will with child in one attempt. It seemed little enough of a sacrifice to see his Omegan spouse tossed from Hartford House like the unwanted baggage he was with all of Society snickering at his shame.
His mind unhelpfully provided him with a clear picture of Will in his suite, leaning against the door with a cat's own lithe grace, his head tilted slightly so that his long curls fell to one side, his sad blue eyes secretive and amused at Hannibal's expense, his full mouth parting on a smile as he asked, "Are you trying to insult me, Hannibal?"

His back stiffened with instinctive affront and offended dignity. He impatiently returned to the desk and added his signature beneath his grandfather's, tossing the quill down with rather more force than was necessary at the recollection of his mate's cheeky comment.

His grandfather watched him with naked disappointment in his amber gaze and Hannibal wondered if he should not have agreed, if there was some other option which would bring the light of pride back to the elderly Alpha's eyes. Instead, he fanned the paper in the air and murmured, "I will have Mr. Stammets file this in the Capital with all haste."

"Yes," Grandfather said, closing his eyes in resignation and sinking into his pillows. "You do that, Hannibal."

Chapter 6

Once his grandfather dismissed him, Hannibal decided to ride down to Mr. Stammets' office in Hartford Town to set eyes on the bustling village again. The road between the estate and the town was properly paved now as well, a simple pattern of plain cobblestone that followed the worn old dirt lane. He wondered at how industrious they'd become to put such a thing in and thought them all very clever for it, making it far easier for them to move from the village proper to the various places on the estate that employed them and on to the greater roads to the Capital.

Mr. Stammets' office was above the bakery, the little sign proclaiming he was in. Hannibal dismounted and idly fastened his bad-tempered mount to a free ring on the plaster-coated wall, his amber eyes flitting around to take in the changes he'd noticed.

There were new shops, new faces, of course. In fact, the town had grown substantially in his absence.

Hannibal meandered down the main street, noticing that even the side streets were paved, albeit with less fanciful designs. Everything had a fresh air about it, scrubbed clean and newly whitewashed, enough so that he wondered if his grandfather had ordered Hartford Town made ready for his visit. He considered this as he roamed about, nodding here and there to others on the walkways. Very few recognized him, only those old enough to remember him from his misspent youth, one of whom owned the bakery he ended up back in front of after his unplanned walk around town.

Mr. Woodward was still holding his place at the counter, spectacles dusted with flour and his graying hair wisping every direction. He caught sight of Hannibal coming through the door and grinned, calling, "As I live and breathe, if it isn't Hannibal Lecter, Lord Clarges himself! Come here, my boy! Come here!"

Hannibal gladly greeted him, not minding the familiarity of the hug he was drawn into.

"You were no taller than my chin the last I saw you! Where've you been, boy?" Mr. Woodward asked, and immediately called, "Katie! Bring tea and a few tarts to the front!"

"Ah, I shouldn't stay," Hannibal said, smiling. "I'm on an errand for Grandfather and got distracted. I wanted to see how much the village has changed."

"Greatly, Lord Clarges! Greatly, indeed! Come, here's some tea, have a seat and chat a moment," he was told, and immediately called, "Katie! Bring tea and a few tarts to the front!"

"Ah, I shouldn't stay," Hannibal said, smiling. "I'm on an errand for Grandfather and got distracted. I wanted to see how much the village has changed."

"Greatly, Lord Clarges! Greatly, indeed! Come, here's some tea, have a seat and chat a moment," he was told, and had no polite way to refuse. He was guided to a small table near the window and bundled into a seat while Mr. Woodward's daughter brought out the requested refreshments. The tea was hot and strong and suited him very nicely, however, and he nibbled the tart politely despite having been stuffed back at the house fit to burst. "Ah, you must be very surprised by all the changes, Lord Clarges! Have you met with Mr. Graham?"

Hannibal stiffened and managed to say with admirable neutrality, "I have not had the occasion to deal much with him."

"Well, you are but newly home, yes," Mr. Woodward said, sipping his own tea and smacking his lips. "I'm used to seeing him of a morning. He likes to ride over and watch the town wake up."

Hannibal frowned, settling his cup in its saucer as gently as he could. "I had not realized he was so familiar with Hartford Town."
“He’s been here a solid six years, now,” Mr. Woodward said, nodding. “Of course, you’ve been trying to arrange to come home. My compliments to His Grace on his choice, Lord Clarges; he’s a well-spoken and bright little fellow, to be sure. He spent near on an hour in the fields when he first arrived here, watching the threshing machine at work and asking all sorts of questions. I sent him to the foreman for his answers.”

He uttered a good-natured, pleased chuckle as if it had been a moment of true fondness. Hannibal frowned, subsiding in his chair and thoughtfully finishing his tea.

“I imagine he spends quite a lot of time amusing himself in town,” he ventured. He pictured Will’s slender body in his dark, solemn clothing and the embarrassing scarcity of his wardrobe and inwardly cursed, knowing he had been no spendthrift in the case of clothing, at least.

“Oh, he comes down now and then to purchase for the House, my Lord, for Cook’s sake or at Mr. Hawkes’ request,” Woodward amiably said, pushing another tart towards him which Hannibal found quite menacing to his overstuffed stomach. “But he does spend every moment of his time attending to the estate with Lord du Maurier since Mr. Verger’s... departure. He is a very dedicated young man, indeed!”

Hannibal’s frown deepened at the thought of his younger cousin showing off his spouse, however unwanted he was. Anthony had married Will by proxy and had always been partial to him in letters. Hannibal’s suspicious nature seized on the niggling idea that perhaps the reason was that Anthony himself had designs on Will. It would be a sure way to best his elder cousin, stealing his spouse from under him. Anthony was an Alpha, after all, and if he was seduced by Will into bonding, why then nothing could be done about it. He knew without a doubt that the reason Anthony had never married was in case Grandfather decided to annul Will’s marriage to Hannibal and hand it all over to his cousin in one fell swoop.

It annoyed him to think of Will seducing Anthony and making a fool of him, but it would solve one of his problems. At least if Will wound up in Anthony’s bed, he’d be out of Hannibal’s hair and someone else’s problem and there was nothing his grandfather could say about it. He knew without a doubt that the reason Anthony had never married was in case Grandfather decided to annul Will’s marriage to Hannibal and hand it all over to his cousin in one fell swoop.

“Yes, a clever little fellow, indeed,” Mr. Woodward said, beaming. “I wish there were three more just like him!”

“Well, much to my misfortune,” Hannibal intoned, standing to take his leave. “There is only the one and he is my problem to deal with. Good day, Mr. Woodward.”

It was only once he scaled the stairs to Mr. Stammets’ office that his brain brought up the other statement, that of Verger, the estate manager, being gone. Frowning, Hannibal pounded on the door and let himself in without a greeting, finding Mr. Stammets quite alarmed and pale behind his desk.

“Ah! Lord Clarges! Er...” His nervous eyes shifted and his pale hands groped over his desk in search of salvation, a pitiable display of ineptitude.

“Pray do not fall into a faint or I will be forced to find myself truly contemptuous of you,” Hannibal warned, tossing down the envelope which held his Grandfather’s addendum. He ungenerously noted that Mr. Stammets had attempted to grow a mustache in the past six years, and it had the sad look of an overused shaving brush clinging to his face. “Grandfather wants this sent to the Capital immediately. Changes to the ownership of Hartford House.”

Mr. Stammets’ hands trembled as he picked it up, hesitantly offering, “There is no seal—”

“It is an addendum only,” Hannibal reiterated, moving to the window to look down at the street below. “Mr. Buddish will find it all quite tidy, I am sure.”

“Yes, Lord Clarges,” Mr. Stammets said, rallying. “I will send someone tonight to deliver it in the morning. Does His Grace wish a copy for his own records?”

Hannibal waved that away, saying, “Whatever you usually do in cases like this, Mr. Stammets, shall suffice well enough.”

He heard papers being shuffled and studied movement behind him as the addendum was prepared. Abruptly unable to control his curiosity any longer, he asked, “What has happened to Mr. Verger?”

Mr. Stammets uttered a soft “eep” of surprise behind him and Hannibal very studiously did not turn around to glare at him as that would in no way help his current line of inquiry. Instead, he patiently waited until the beta man said, “It was discovered that he was fleecing the estate, Lord Clarges, of quite a large sum every year. Nearly the whole of Hartford House’s profits, I believe, meager though they were.”
Hannibal did turn then, scowling, and asked, “How was this theft discovered?”

Mr. Stammets paled, if such was even possible for a man of his anemic complexion, and softly offered, “Mr. Graham checked his books and reported it to His Grace immediately.”

Hannibal’s brows drew down in a grim glare. “Am I to assume that the Earl of Reddig somehow found himself poking into the business of my estate manager, Mr. Stammets, or are you trying to tell me that an Omega was able to identify a mathematical error? Because they are equally unbelievable to me, sir.”

“Mr. Graham, as in your spouse, my Lord,” Mr. Stammets corrected, too nervous to be lying.

“It must have been a very obvious ploy, indeed, for him to find it,” Hannibal mused, wondering why in the seven hells Will was bothering the estate manager anyway.

“Actually, my Lord, it was very well hidden,” Mr. Stammets said, seeming much more relieved on the count that Hannibal would not strangle him out of turn for mentioning his unwanted spouse. “His Grace’s accountants were quite dismayed when Mr. Graham brought them to confirm. Mr. Verger is now in jail serving a sentence for fraud and theft.”

“And who, pray tell, was hired in his stead?” Hannibal asked.

“N-no one, my Lord,” Mr. Stammets answered, petting his heavy mustache, which made him look like a woeful walrus with a nervous condition.

Hannibal heaved a sigh, adding that to his mental list of things to tend to while he was home. An estate the size of Hartford House required constant attention, hence the estate manager. With no one to tend the books all this time, things were surely falling to rack and ruin, just as he had feared since Anthony was hardly a stand-in. He could not fathom why his grandfather had not contacted him earlier with things in such a deplorable state!

“Is there anything else of crippling importance I should know of before one of the townsfolk sees fit to tell me? Hm?” Hannibal asked, arching one brow in a haughty, scathing glare.

“No, Lord Clarges,” Mr. Stammets said, swinging back towards faint again.

“Very well,” Hannibal sighed, annoyed with him but feeling like a bully thanks to the man’s insufferable pandering to the Lecter family. “Good day, Mr. Stammets.”

“Good day, Lord Clarges.” It sounded every bit as relieved as Mr. Stammets had attempted to prevent it from sounding.

Out of sorts and brimming with tea and pastries, Hannibal retrieved his horse and took the road back to Hartford House at an easy trot, squinting against the sun as it angled across the sky towards the horizon. He slowed the horse to a walk when he reached the shade of old trees sheltering the greatest extent of the road, allowing the breeze to cool his irritation.

It immediately flamed again as he arrived at the house and spied Will and another figure approaching from the other side of the estate, leading their horses and talking with their heads pressed together, thick as thieves.

Hannibal drew the horse to a stop and dismounted, leading it towards his troublesome spouse and what turned out to be his bounder of a cousin, Anthony. Neither one of them had shoes on and their pants legs were rolled up to their knees, jackets loosened. Hannibal could see their boots slung from their empty saddles, tied by their neckerchiefs along with all manner of mystifying gear.

“Is this how you’ve spent your time in my absence?” he asked, startling both of them. Will looked up at him and the mischievous smile on his full lips vanished at once, replaced with wary tightness that irked Hannibal to see. Anthony looked guilty as sin, as well he should.

“Will has been working nonstop the past couple of weeks,” Anthony said, rising to his defense as stupid Alphas were so often wont to do for their Omegan counterparts. “I decided to break him out and take him fishing.”

“Fishing?” Hannibal echoed, as if he’d never heard of such a thing before. He spied the picnic basket and pointedly asked, “And lazing about eating as well?”

“Lord Clarges,” Will said, careful to keep his voice calm and even despite the sudden spike in his awareness. He fretfully lifted one hand to his open shirt collar, regretting the loss of the neckerchief that usually helped to shroud his scent. “I am sure you have more pressing business to tend to than questioning either one of us.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed, noticing how Will touched his bare throat with slender fingers, brushing the pulse that ticked visibly beneath his white skin. He could scent him, now at last, faintly—sweet-hot and edible, even more compelling than the
baker's delightful confections. It prickled at Hannibal's nerves, and he resented it, which only made him more inclined to view his spouse with greater affront.

“I can only imagine the gossip about you when the servants see you in such a state,” Hannibal said, his gaze dropping to Will’s bare, muddy feet. He noticed the fish dangling from a cord in Will’s hand, the same hand he was leading his mount with. It was quite a large fish. Hannibal wondered how he held it so easily, weak as Omegas tended to be.

“The servants are used to my oddities, and are very forgiving, considering I am possessed of only half a mind,” Will said, rapidly growing angry with the sudden critical interest Hannibal was taking in him after six years of relative freedom.

“Hannibal,” Anthony said, attempting to ease the sudden tension that sprang between them. “It was just a little fun—”

“I suppose that’s all it ever is,” Hannibal said, dragging Anthony into his judgmental gaze.

“Hannibal,” Will said, drawing heavily on his patience, reminding himself that he was calm, even-tempered, and difficult to agitate.

“Running about barefoot like some sort of hoyden,” Hannibal continued, ignoring him in favor of berating his cousin.

“Hannibal,” Will said again, blowing out a breath of frustration when he continued to be ignored like a brainless child.

“Now see here—” Anthony cut in.

“As an Alpha, Anthony, you should at least have tried to correct him,” Hannibal said, heedless of the dangerous spark in Will’s eyes.

“Hannibal! I am standing right here!”

“They are malleable creatures, cousin, easily swayed to unbecoming behaviors—”

He was quite suddenly and shockingly smacked in the face with the cold, slippery side of Will’s catch, hard enough that he stumbled sideways, unprepared for the force of it. Aghast, he stared in open-mouthed shock at Will, whose cheeks were blooming with pink fury, looking very much like a Valkyrie on the wing.

“How is that for unbecoming behavior?!”

Utterly at a loss for how a diffident, silly Omega could manage to channel such shocking temper, Hannibal mutely stared after him as Will turned on his heel and marched towards the house without a backwards glance, the unfortunate trout swinging like a pendulum from his tight little fist.

Anthony recovered faster than Hannibal and darted after Will with both horses, his throaty laughter enough snap Hannibal out of it.

Unwilling to chase after them for the sake of his pride, Hannibal contented himself with saying, “Utterly unstable and ridiculous things, Omegas.”

Which in no way dismissed the fact that Will had, against all of Hannibal’s expectations and directly contrary to the truths as he saw them, coshed him with a fish almost as big as he was.

It was massively unsettling.

His smarting cheek smelling unpleasantly of trout, Hannibal tipped his chin up, stiffened his back, and hastily handed his horse off to a stable boy so he could go to his suite and have another wash.

It took Will a very long time to calm down and he blamed that on Hannibal, too. He knew well enough how his Gift worked by now and resented that his bond to Hannibal meant he reflected his unwanted husband so quickly and with such effect.

He had just been so angry!

“I’ve worked too hard to be spoken to in such a way!” he said, feeling his temper rise again, so rare in him until he was well and thoroughly put out.

Jimmy nodded vigorously, straightening Will’s cuff to fasten it at his slender wrist.

“Malleable and easily swayed to unbecoming behaviors,’ he said!” Will quoted, fire rising in his eyes. “I can’t remember when I’ve ever been so offended!”

“Lord Clarges is a man who values his own opinion rather higher than most,” Jimmy said, the most unfavorable comment he’d offered so far.
Will’s eyes glazed slightly with the memory and he said, “I slapped him in the face with the fish, Jimmy.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Graham, you did what?” Jimmy asked with delicacy, looking up with the hint of a smile playing around his full mouth.

“I slapped him in the face with the fish,” Will whispered, a burble of laughter escaping him. He clamped both hands over his mouth before he could dissolve into giggles, tears of mirth escaping him when Jimmy sucked his lips in and bit down to keep from unseemly laughter.

There was no stopping it then, their mutual amusement. Jimmy cackled like a laying hen with delight, eyes wide, and Will stifled his own horrified laughter with his pillow.

“I don’t know what came over me!” he gasped, now shocked at his own behavior without Hannibal’s expectations to skew him. “He ignored me like I wasn’t even there and… I was so angry!”

“If anyone needs to let out a little anger, Mr. Graham,” Jimmy managed, hitching with laughter, “it’s you. Oh, besides, it’s not as if you hurt him. It was a trout, for the gods’ sake, not a hammer.”

“I have no idea how I’ll get through dinner,” Will admitted, standing when Jimmy gestured so he could be helped into his dinner jacket, both of them still fighting amusement. “I just keep seeing the look on his face. I think his horse could have spoken to him in French and he’d have been less surprised.”

“Well, he is rather unusual in his assumptions about Omegas, a sexist of such caliber that other sexists cringe in embarrassment,” Jimmy said, buttoning him swiftly into his jacket and taking up his neckerchief to spritz it with scent killer. It was an added precaution as all of Will’s freshly-washed clothing was soaked in the stuff before being left to dry, as per his request. “Especially considering he’s only ever really known one.”

“One?” Will echoed, tipping his chin up for Jimmy to layer and knot the cloth for him. “Jimmy, you must tell me now that you’ve mentioned it.”

“Ah, I shouldn’t have said anything,” Jimmy said, concentrating on his task. “His Grace has forbidden us to speak of her and there’s nothing worth mentioning anyway.”

“Except that she ruined Hannibal on Omegas?” Will asked.

“Well that, if the rumors are true,” Jimmy conceded, fussing with Will’s coat and cuffs. He finished and put both palms on Will’s shoulders, warmly squeezing him and telling him with earnest concern, “Don’t think about it, okay? It won’t do you any good and certainly won’t endear you to Lord Clarges.”

“Worse than coshing him with a trout?” Will meekly asked, feeling the dangerous return of laughter threatening to steal his calm.

“Worse than coshing him with a whole river of trout. Come on, it’s time,” Jimmy said, patting him again before heading for the door. “Lovely night you’re in for, Mr. Graham—you, Lord Clarges, and Lord du Maurier. Lucky for you I think His Grace is feeling well enough to command the table tonight.”

Will exhaled softly in relief and headed down to the formal dining room, pausing on the stairs when Anthony called down to him from the landing.

“United front,” he said when he caught up to Will, dressed in one of the few sets of formal wear the staff kept secreted away for him in one of the guest rooms. “Partners in crime and all.”

Will smiled, walking in stride with him down to the dining room. His humor evaporated abruptly at the sight of Hannibal already seated, his fine mouth pursed with irritation and murderous thoughts lighting his amber eyes.

“Where’s Grandfather?” Anthony asked, deflecting the tension with his question and using it to give Will time to take his seat without being set upon.

“He declined to join us,” Hannibal said, gesturing for the footmen to begin serving. He noticed Will’s formal dinner clothes were as bleak and plain as his day wear and felt a twinge of annoyance, feeling as if the world must think him a jealous miser for keeping his spouse in such dour, plain clothing. “I am glad to see that you remembered to dress for dinner, Will, though wearing shoes must no doubt pain you significantly.”

“And I am glad that you remembered to wash beforehand,” Will said, his voice as mild and calm as Hannibal’s, exercising what he considered exemplary self-control to keep from laughing at the memory of Hannibal’s surprised expression. “Trout is such a pungent fish.”
Hannibal’s lips twitched in a quickly-repressed smile, and he cleared his throat, regaining his former frown when he sternly reminded himself that Omegas were far too ignorant to express such humor on purpose.

“I had not expected to you to show your face here, Anthony,” he said, shifting his attention to his cousin, who looked quite amused and relaxed when he had no right to be.

“Oh, well, I’m here rather a lot recently,” Anthony said, volunteering the information with a grin as he took up his silverware. “Will tends to pine.”

Hannibal’s noble nose wrinkled. He didn’t justify that with a response except to warn, “Don’t be crude.”

The appetizer was ladled neatly into waiting bowls, hot and fragrant.

“Eel soup?” Hannibal inquired, tasting a spoonful and finding it delicious, as all of Cook’s recipes were.

“It’s Anthony’s favorite,” Will said, taking a tentative taste of his own. “I had Mrs. Pimms alter the menu.”

“What on earth for?” Hannibal asked, annoyed for no reason he could fathom except that Will had gone out of his way for his cousin and he did not like it in the least.

“Because it was no trouble and I had already planned a soup starter,” Will said, giving him a quizzical look.

“You set the menu?” Hannibal asked, confounded. “But Cook always sets her own menu.”

“Not for some six years now, Lord Clarges,” Will said, a hint of a smile playing about his red lips.

Hannibal found himself staring. It was unconscionable, he knew, that someone should have such a mouth and smile with it in such a way. There must be laws to protect gentlemen from such smiles, surely. He was visibly startled from staring when Will added, “I have taken up the duties of the absent Duchess for your Grandfather’s sake.”

“Other than coshing perfectly innocent gentlemen in the face with trout?” Hannibal asked, noting the way Will ducked his head, which was certainly more akin to amusement than shame. “I cannot imagine.”

“He runs the estate, Hannibal,” Anthony said, practically crowing about it.

“I beg your pardon?” Hannibal asked. “I’m afraid I didn’t hear you correctly. Omegas can hardly choose their own clothing without an Alpha’s approval. How on earth could Will manage to run an estate?”

“You’re absolutely right, Lord Clarges,” Will said, overriding Anthony’s indignant response. He took a delicate taste of his soup, his spoon sliding between his plump lips with smooth ease. Hannibal found it shockingly obscene and fought not to tell him so as Will removed his spoon from his mouth with equally unsettling grace. He wet his lower lip with the tip of his pink tongue and added, “I imagine the entire place has fallen to ruin.”

“I can only think so, considering there’s been no estate manager,” Hannibal said, glaring at the spoon in Will’s hand, idly thinking that perhaps he should have the silver changed. It was simply defective tableware to blame.

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“The house is practically falling down around us,” Will said, glancing down at his spoon, where Hannibal’s glare was directed. He tucked it into his soup against all good manners, mystified when his husband’s amber eyes tracked the movement.

“Isn’t it just?” Hannibal responded, lifting his gaze to find Will’s blue eyes on him, sparkling with amusement, and he cleared his throat again, annoyed because surely Will was not intentionally baiting him?

“Why, I cannot imagine we are even able to dine in here, shoddy as things have become,” Will said, wondering how far Hannibal would allow him to go before he realized what he was agreeing with.

About that far, apparently. He glared at Will and gruffly said, “You are perverse.”

“Then we have something in common after all,” Will meekly told him, and took a sip of his wine to hide his smile.

Anthony looked from Will to Hannibal, his blue eyes flicking back and forth. Whatever he thought of the situation, he wisely kept to himself and finished his soup.

Their bowls were cleared away and replaced with the meat course accompanied by a slew of very lovely vegetable dishes. It was a lavish enough dinner for just family, though Hannibal irritably thought it should be more grand in honor of his homecoming.

“I can hardly contain my curiosity about what main course an Omega will choose when left to its own devices,” Hannibal said, turning his ire on Will himself when that salacious spoon was removed as a target.

Will lowered his head again. Hannibal had the feeling once more that he was only barely containing the urge to laugh. He raised his head, his lovely face set to studious serenity as the lid was lifted from the platter.
Hannibal stared in at the contents in consternation as Will mildly told him, “*Trout*, my Lord.” Hannibal looked from the platter to Will’s tranquil, suspiciously blank face and ruefully admitted his spouse was a rather unusual example of Omegan nature, especially the way his blue eyes twinkled with amusement that chased away his usual sadness.

It was incredibly unsettling, to say the least.

“Is that the same fish you slapped Hannibal with?” Anthony asked, all innocence.

Will’s voice was even and prim, betraying nothing more than polite calm when he said, “Yes.” Anthony laughed, waiting for the pieces to be served before saying, “I never dreamed to see you so taken aback, Hannibal!” “I believe anyone would be taken aback,” Will said before Hannibal could retort, taking his silverware into his dainty white hands, “were they slapped with a fish.”

“I’ll thank you not to make excuses for my state of being when you are the one responsible for it,” Hannibal said, deciding to eat the creature that had so offended him as eating Will was certainly not an option. At least not in such a literal way as this.

“I do apologize for defending you, Lord Clarges,” Will said, amused by Hannibal’s beleaguered expression as much as by the presence of the fish. “I will not, however, apologize for my behavior. You were being provoking.”

“You behaved like a savage,” Hannibal pointed out, and glared at Anthony to still his snickering. “You refused to listen to me,” Will softly countered.

“So you settled on a violent assault with a trout?” Hannibal asked, and Anthony’s snickers turned to chuckles.

“You had agitated me,” Will said, taking a small bite of his trout. “I will show considerably more caution in the future!” Hannibal said, looking down his noble nose at Will’s slight smile.

“Lest I next be coshed with something more dangerous than a fish.”

“Then I believe I have made my point,” Will said.

“Your preference for settling things with violence is not a point,” Hannibal said, and, to Anthony, “You will control yourself, sir, or remove yourself upstairs.”

“I can hardly do either,” Anthony said, helpless with laughter, looking from one to the other. “I would never forgive myself for missing this!”

“Have a care, Anthony, lest you agitate Will,” Hannibal warned, gesturing around the dining room with his fork. “There are any number of items at hand for you to be brained with.”

“I believe this conversation has run its course,” Will cut in, gesturing for more wine. “Everyone, let’s please enjoy dinner, dangerous as it may be.”

Hannibal began to argue, but abruptly cut off, unsettled by how much Will’s sparkling blue eyes could convey when his face was schooled to show so little. Had any other Omega even a pinch of Will’s beauty they would be deadly with it, he knew. He was very lucky that Will was not excessively smart, even if he was frighteningly pointed in his humor.

Will glanced up and caught Hannibal’s assessing glare and cocked his head slightly. *Sickening*, Hannibal had called him that day so long ago, and wondered if Hannibal was even now cataloging his deficiencies, thanks to the reminder of the trout. In a voice so low he risked Hannibal not hearing him, he said, “Forgive me, Lord Clarges, if I have inadvertently ruined your appetite.”

Hannibal heard him, reluctantly realizing Will’s presence had indeed robbed him of his appetite, but not for reasons he was willing to admit.

“Yes, well, I shall strive to enjoy as I can despite it,” Hannibal said, and was strangely disappointed to see the amusement in Will’s eyes give way to cool reserve.

The heavy courses were broken up by a refreshing citrus shaved ice Hannibal found quite to his liking. Luckily, nothing more dangerous than the trout made an appearance through their meal, which passed in idle chatter initiated and sustained by Anthony.

Hannibal found himself quite annoyed by the easy familiarity between them, but could readily admit that if he had stayed these last six years, then he might have managed a similar rapport with Will.
He was confoundingly unlike any other Omega Hannibal had been exposed to and certainly nothing even vaguely like the
Omegas his father’s concubine had surrounded herself with. Hannibal had never in his life met an Omega who would dare to
make him the butt of any joke or give him such mulish, sharp looks as if he had somehow done something wrong. He wondered
if he might not buy Will something sparkling and distracting; surely then he would be amenable to Hannibal’s advances?

“What do you think, Hannibal?” Anthony asked, forcefully proving he had not been paying any attention in the least to
anything other than his spouse’s tranquil face.

Hannibal cleared his throat and said, “I think I have far too many issues with the estate which need addressing to pay
much attention to such trifling things.”

Anthony seemed vaguely affronted by that, and Will’s chin tipped up, cheeks pinkening with sudden color that was quite
becoming on him.

“Hannibal,” Anthony said, but Will lifted his hand to hush him.

“No, Anthony, do not trouble Hannibal’s mind with issues which are beyond him,” Will said, his voice cold enough to keep
the citrus ice frozen and his words bringing a dark flush to Hannibal’s cheeks. Before he could scold him for being so pert, Will
airily overrode him with, “Lord Clarges, you went to the village today. Can I assume you’ve settled your business with His
Grace?”

Hannibal frowned softly, thinking of the agreement they’d struck, what he’d decided to do to wrest control of Hartford
House from Will’s unknowing hands.

“Yes,” he said, seeing the almost imperceptible sag of relief fall over Will’s slender, straight shoulders.

“Then you will not remain overlong,” Will said, glad to be rid of him. Hannibal was a dangerous presence, however little
Will allowed it to show. Six years ago, Will had bonded to him instinctively during Hannibal’s vicious tirade in a frightened
attempt to submit to him, to somehow prevent his anger, to keep from being shattered from the inside out.

He had been shattered, however, and quite thoroughly, but the bond had stuck fast. All Will knew was that he was
vulnerable to Hannibal in ways he was indifferent to other Alphas he had the occasion to meet over the years. He was sensitive
to his scent, drawn to look at him, attuned to his words and the sound of his voice in a way that made him impossible to ignore.

In short, it was hell having Hannibal near him reinforcing those ugly truths that Will had fought so hard to change for
himself over the lonely, endless days and nights of the past six years.

“I had not intended to stay any longer than necessary to settle our business,” Hannibal said, watching Will’s subtle
responses, wondering why he inexplicably could not catch anything more than a faint trace of his scent again. Perversely, he
added, “However, I have decided to remain for the foreseeable future.”

Will’s face fell to stony, smooth stillness, his blue eyes half-veiled by the thick fan of his lashes.

“This is your home, no matter what your Grandfather has put to his solicitor,” Will said. “I am sure you will be comfortable
here however long you decide to stay. Excuse me, my Lords. Mr. Hawkes will serve brandy in the Red Drawing Room for you
both.”

He rose with the same dignity and grace as a ruling monarch and left the dining room, both Alphas looking after him.

“Well, that was badly done of you,” Anthony said, drumming his fingers on the table before standing.

“I cannot be held accountable for the fickle nature of an Omega, Anthony,” Hannibal reminded him, rising and
straightening his jacket fretfully. “I am surprised he survived a dinner with two Alphas without falling to tears or fainting dead
away.”

Anthony snorted, dogging his steps as he headed for the drawing room where a cheery fire was laid and two wing-back
chairs were waiting.

“Will? Faint?” Anthony scoffed, choosing a chair before Hannibal could and propping his feet up with a sigh. “You have no
idea who you’ve married.”

“I have no idea who you have married,” Hannibal said, taking the other chair with more grace and dignity than Anthony
had mustered. “He is an Omega. That is all anyone ever needs know of a person.”

“Good gods, man, your prejudice makes my teeth ache,” Anthony said, shaking his head. “I remember her a little, you
know. Your father’s mistress? She was frightening, and a dangerous influence on your father, but she was just a human,
Hannibal. We're all just humans. You judge every other person in your world by virtue of their character; can you not extend the same courtesy to Will?"

Hannibal frowned, taking the brandy offered by Mr. Hawkes, who moved with the silent stealth of a cat despite his bulk.

“You shouldn’t have dismissed what he’s done here, Hannibal,” Anthony said, taking his own brandy and settling in. “It was incredibly rude of you to call it trifling.”

“What, that he had the estate manager fired so that the place has run on its own steam for six years?” Hannibal laughed, taking a sip. “Frittered away Grandfather’s fortune to keep Hartford House afloat without proper, skilled management?”

“No, updating the house,” Anthony countered. “Bringing in new businesses and adding tenants, converting the fallow fields to raise livestock—Hartford House is more than self-sufficient, cousin. Hartford House is productive, thanks to his efforts.”

Hannibal pursed his mouth to hold in an automatic denial that an Omega couldn’t possibly manage to do such. Instead, he said, “I have seen no evidence of Will’s hand in such things and you are outwearing your welcome, Anthony.”

“I will always have a place here while Will is in control of Hartford House, though I suppose now that might not be for much longer,” Anthony said, and when Hannibal glared at him, he added, “No, I haven’t told Will. Grandfather asked me not to, though I cannot imagine why he has stooped to such deceit.”

“Then you know of the changes he’s made?”

Anthony nodded, unhappy. “It’s churlish and cruel considering how much has been taken from Will already, but he is determined to have that child and you are too stubborn to agree otherwise. Had he not promised me that Will would have a home here until his death and made provisions for him in his will, then I would have warned your mate not to fall for it. Instead, I find myself complicit in my silence regarding your plots to oust him from his home after everything he’s done to make a life here. I am more a cad than you are.”

“To being insufferable cads, then,” Hannibal murmured, and Anthony toasted to that with a twisted, unhappy smile.

Will had a terrible time getting to sleep knowing Hannibal would be sleeping in the room next to him. It worried him, not so much because he feared Hannibal’s intentions in regards to his marital rights, but because Will knew he couldn’t trust himself. He’d spent his entire life denying his Omegan nature, and less than a full day in Hannibal’s company had him doubting his own ability to control the threat of his instincts.

He eventually fell into restless slumber, his dreamscape transformed to an ocean side cliff jutting up into the velvety night sky. He was perched there atop it, naked and trembling and terrified because he could hear the rage in the waves crashing on the rocks below, hungry and demanding tribute.

‘Do as he says. Whatever he wants of you, you give him. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes, Father,’ Will said, hearing his voice from somewhere behind him. Hands shoved him forward, towards the black shadow of a man there at the summit.

The roar of the furious ocean terrified him but his father kept pushing him, telling him over and over to do whatever it took, to give whatever he needed to give, down to his blood and bones.

Will took a step toward the cliff’s edge, something deep inside of him telling him that it would be for the best, that the comfort he sought was there. It scared him almost to the point of freezing and he wanted to turn back, but the more scared he got, the more steps he took until he was so near the form at the edge that he could smell the salty ocean.

Hannibal was the person there before him, a murky, indistinct shape wavering between shadow and the starlit night.

‘Come here,’ he said, and opened his arms in welcome.

Frightened and desperate for comfort, seeking his Alpha for protection from his father’s shoving hands, Will flung himself forward only for Hannibal to step aside.

Will plunged from cliff towards the swelling, angry waves, the sound of Hannibal’s amused laughter becoming the noise of his own gasping sobs as he spilled from his bed, trembling and terrified.

Sweating and wracked with shudders, Will pressed his hand to his galloping heart and buried his face against the side of his bed, willing reality to return.
“It was only a dream,” he breathed, the words shortened and stuttering with the force of his panting. He wiped his tears on his sheet, swallowing back his sobs until he had them under control, grateful that his half-awake attack of nerves had gone unnoticed by anyone else.

But the image of the cliff would not leave him. It stayed there in the back of his mind, threatening and dangerous as his father’s snarling voice, a stark reminder of what awaited him if he ever tried to pretend his bond to Hannibal Lecter was anything other than an unwanted miscarriage of instincts brought on in a stress-induced bid for escape.

Chapter 7

Hannibal woke the next morning rather later than he intended, but though he had gone to bed at a decent hour, he had lain awake several hours after thinking of Will Graham.

_Unusual_ was too paltry a word to use to describe the Omega his cousin had married him to. In less than a day he’d been subtly dressed down, made to look a miser by the state of Will’s belongings, smacked with a fish in a burst of unexpected violence, and honest-to-gods _teased_ at his own table.

_Teased_!

_Antithesis of everything Hannibal knew was true_ might be a better description, all things considered. Hannibal had seen for himself the changes in Hartford Town and in the house itself, the updates to the fixtures and plumbing that brought it back on par with modern homes, the cottages and new businesses in the thriving town adjoining the estate. If he gave credit to Anthony’s nonsense, then Will had done a passable job attempting to keep Hartford House afloat in the absence of a true estate manager. It was very difficult for him to think a lone Omega had been able to mastermind such things without racking up a mountain of debt, but Grandfather would never allow such flagrant spending for long and Will had shown he was a tad more than unusual in most regards. Hannibal knew firsthand how difficult it was to manage a holding this size, having watched his grandfather bear up under the burden for the years he had lived here with him. It gave him a curling tendril of admiration for Will that he had attempted such a task on his own despite what Nature had stacked against him in terms of sense, reliability, and motivation.

Yes, he was willing to concede Will was not _entirely_ bereft of brains.

But he could put all that nonsense behind him now and turn his curly-haired head towards his own interests, which no doubt included watercolors, gossip, and an extraordinary amount of embroidery.

Feeling rather proud of how understanding he was being of his mate’s inherent faults, Hannibal got out of bed and readied himself for the day with Berger’s assistance, wondering if Will had managed to acquire more trout for breakfast.

Will, however, was not present for breakfast, he found.

In fact, he was quite alone in the large dining room that seemed very vast and empty to him in that moment.

“I trust you are well, my Lord?” Mr. Hawkes politely inquired as breakfast for one was situated on the table for him.

“Ah, yes, Hawkes,” he said, frowning softly. “I’m afraid even after so long away from war, I’m still an early riser.”

“I hear it has begun anew, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, instructing the staff with subtle, almost imperceptible gestures. “And with greater fervor.”

“Indeed, it has,” Hannibal agreed, his frown deepening as there was still no sign of his spouse. “Definitive this time, I hope and pray. But tell me, Hawkes, where is my spouse this morning? Commanding breakfast in bed, I suppose? Or is the hour still too early?”

“Mr. Graham is in the estate manager’s office, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes answered, delivering the paper still warm from the house maid’s iron, footmen ranged along the wall as if an army waited to break their fast instead of one slightly disgruntled Marquess. “As he usually is this time of day once he finishes his ride to the village.”

“When does he normally rise?” Hannibal asked, surprised. His father’s Omega had slept until well after noon and complained if awakened earlier.

“Before dawn, my Lord,” Hawkes said, gesturing a footman to bring over his tray. “Usually around ten minutes to five is when he has his breakfast, my Lord.”
Hannibal frowned, saying, “Good gods, how industrious.”

“He is often very busy, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, his voice never wavering from solemn monotone as Hannibal was served, “and is usually occupied until dinner.”

“And my cousin?”

“He left for Fernhill early this morning after sharing toast and coffee with Mr. Graham, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes somberly told him. “It is somewhat of a tradition of theirs these past years.”

Hannibal didn’t like the sound of that one little bit. He angled a glance at the lined and proud man who had served the Lecter family since he’d been nothing more than a coal boy, knowing if anyone would give him the truth of things, it would be old Hawkes.

“What is he like, Mr. Hawkes?” he asked, taking up his silverware, an image of Will sliding his spoon into his mouth reminding him violently that he must have the tableware changed out.

“Very competent, my Lord,” Hawkes said, standing to one side with dignified grace. “Mr. Graham is exceedingly meticulous. He has a very quick and curious mind that has become quite an asset to Hartford House and His Grace relies on him heavily.”

Hannibal nodded slightly, mouth pursing with thought.

“What is the village summation of him?” he asked.

“I’m afraid he is rather reclusive, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes easily answered. “He is often not recognized as your spouse.”

That brought an unbidden chuckle to the surface and Hannibal asked, “I assume he sets them to rights?” He rather hoped a trout or two had been involved.

“On the contrary, my Lord, he does not claim any ties to the Lecter family at all,” Mr. Hawkes said, a faint note of disapproval threading its way into his voice. “It is a mistake he insists on fostering in order to do his work without distraction. But he is very kind to the staff when he is not required to be, and takes personal interest in all of us.”

Hannibal mulled that one over, digging into his breakfast with sudden appetite. He recalled his conversation with Mr. Woodward and realized with some surprise that the old baker had been speaking of Will as an employee, not as Hannibal’s spouse. It was quite a curious thing. Mystified, he asked, “Is that why you all refer to him as Mr. Graham?”

Hawkes cleared his throat, uncomfortable, and said, “He was quite insistent, my Lord, that you would find it distasteful otherwise. He seems to be unshakably convinced his place here is only a temporary one.”

Hannibal eyed his stoic face, quite sure that Hawkes had given him a means with which to grant Will his place here while rescuing his own pride.

“I will consider it,” he said, turning back to his breakfast, and was surprised by his own sincerity. He read the paper, finished his breakfast, and meandered out into the pleasant mid-morning air to walk the half mile or so the estate manager’s office, where he opened the door without knocking.

He found Will there, as Hawkes had said he would be. His dark, curly-haired head was bent to his books and a pair of wire-framed spectacles were perched on his nose, giving him a scholarly air quite at home on him.

“I’m busy,” he said by way of greeting, only then looking up at the man before him, “Hannibal.”
“I’ve come to check the books,” Hannibal informed him, feeling strangely like an intruder, which only irritated him. If Will was surprised to see him, he did an excellent job of concealing it.

“Yes, I imagine you have, considering.” Will said, straightening. That one hung in the air, a defiance of Hannibal’s opinion that Omegas lacked both the brains and motivation to do anything more than lie on their backs. It quite surprised Hannibal to hear him say such a thing. It was completely at odds with the boy who had collapsed into a heap of disgrace at very little provocation.

It was very much in keeping, however, with the young man who had slung a fish at his face in frustration.

“Hawkes assures me you’ve been very meticulous,” Hannibal said, unsure how to rescue himself from that one. He could catch no scent from Will, no trace of his Omegan self even this close. There was no trembling, no subservience, no sign that he saw an Alpha before him and that unsettled Hannibal. Will, he decided, unsettled him entirely, in fact. He was too calm and collected now, as if entirely unaffected by six years of separation. He’d made it clear that he was no longer frightened of him and had no intentions of deferring to him. He was absolutely out of character for an Omega and it was absolutely uncalled for.

Hannibal took a step further into the room, hands clasped behind his back, looking it over as if searching for any sign of lack on Will’s part, but actually finding a convenient excuse not to look overlong at Will’s large blue eyes and poised face.

“So much has changed in the last six years,” he remarked, attempting to engage him in conversation and offer an apology of sorts for his unintended insult regarding their talk of the estate last night. Too, he knew, if he had any hope of getting the child his grandfather had contracted for, he would need Will’s consent. He was coming rapidly to the conclusion it would take more than a few sparkly, distracting baubles to divert Will Graham. Perhaps an allowance to make those purchases on his own and pretend independence?

In response to his meager attempt, Will only said, “Yes.”

“I find the house much more pleasant now,” Hannibal went on, glancing over his shoulder to see if Will would be flattered by that, at least. Appealing to an Omega’s vanity was a certain way to gain their favor.

Will didn’t appear to be flattered in the least. He was looking at his balances again. Instead of fawning delight at his accomplishments being noticed, he merely said, “It needed updating. I didn’t want your grandfather living in unseemly conditions.”

“Ah.”

“We used the estate’s surplus, of course,” Will said, lifting his gaze again with something like fire in his eyes to add, “In case you were worried I was spending your inheritance.”

Hannibal frowned.

Will smiled slightly, a flitting ghost of a thing, and idly tapped the quill of his pen against the desk, waiting with polite impatience for Hannibal to do whatever it was he wanted to do and get out of his hair.

Hannibal had never been made to feel like a pest before and he didn’t like it one bit.

“I’m thinking of bringing my daughter here now that the house is so well-kept,” he said, watching Will carefully for signs of distress, wishing now to get a reaction out of him, some sign that he could be provoked as he’d been yesterday when he’d been barefoot, unkempt, and entirely furious.

Will tilted his head and he said with an elegant shrug, “I assumed you would want her near you if you decide to stay.”

“Pack?” Hannibal asked, a faint tone of condescension coloring his voice. Had he found something that bothered his spouse at last? Was the prospect of living here with Hannibal’s mistress and child finally enough to send him into a typical Omegan temper tantrum?
“I would imagine she'll be needing the adjoining suite,” Will briskly said, setting his desk to rights and straightening to
meet Hannibal’s gaze without reserve. “It would seem strange, after all, if the spouse you despise has more status in the house
than the woman you’ve chosen to have children with.”

It was so damnably practical that Hannibal scowled at him, unable to find the smallest trace of the boy he’d been married
to in the young man before him.

“And where, pray tell, would you go?”

Will shrugged again as if he hadn’t thought about it before, saying, “The Capital, perhaps. It’s been six years, I could visit
my sisters, or take over another one of your estates and make it productive... well, as productive as I can manage with my
feeble intellect and inconstant nature. It’s no business of yours what I do.”

Hannibal bit back his retort at the mocking way Will sent his own words back at him, unwilling to open that particular
door. Before he could sufficiently recover, Will moved the opposite way around the desk, avoiding him, and headed out the
door, calling, “Everything should be in order. If not, feel free to blame my empty-headed vanity for claiming so.”

Thinking things had not gone at all as he had planned, Hannibal settled at the desk and opened the account books with a
heaving sigh of bored resignation, the faint trace of Will’s warmth evaporating quickly with his absence.

Will took the long way back up, cutting back across the hedgerow to meander through the garden. He knew every square
foot of Hartford House inside and out—the gardens, the vast forests where game slid sly-eyed and fearless, the echoing halls
with their disapproving portraits, the labyrinthine passages that ran between the walls connecting the rooms in a maze of
escape routes, the cellars with their bellowing furnaces spilling heat up waiting pipes. He knew it all as intimately as he knew
himself, but that did not make it his. Neither familiarity nor a Duke’s decree would give him a right to stay here. Not now. Not
anymore.

He kept hearing Hannibal telling him that he would bring his mistress and daughter here.

He kept hearing his own calm reply, said with a detachment that had surprised even himself.

Because he didn’t feel detached. He felt insulted and, above all, angry to the depths of his soul that all he had worked so
hard for would be lost all over again, as it had been in his father’s house, and it would not matter if Hartford House was his. He
could not imagine dislodging Hannibal Lecter from his ancestral home if he decided to stay. Will would be forced to leave, or
else spend the rest of his days living alongside his spouse’s real and desired family, once more the object of pity and ridicule.

It took a long time of walking to work off the worst of it and remind himself that he had no say in things. Hannibal was his
husband and, by law, could do as he pleased. Will, as his Omegan spouse, had no other choice but to accept it.

But that didn’t mean he had to accept it gladly or easily.

“Mr. Graham, His Grace would like to see you,” Will was told the moment he made his way up to the House proper, Mr.
Hawkes appropriately blank-faced. Will was, however, well acquainted with the many types of blank faces the aging butler
could give and knew he was excited about something.

“Thank you, Mr. Hawkes,” he said, striding through towards the Duke’s suite, ignoring the flurry of servants around him
but wondering why they were so energetic.

He knocked softly and let himself in, calling ahead, “Grandfather? It’s Will.”

“Ah! Will! Come, come here!” Grandfather said, sounding more lively and aware than Will had heard him in months.

He found the elderly Duke up and dressed and already in his wheelchair, looking such a picture of health that Will
wondered at it.

“Come here, my dear,” His Grace said again, gesturing him closer to the desk where he was seated.

“What happened?” Will asked, crossing the room to lay a fond hand on the man’s shoulder, the only affection he
ever allowed himself. “You seem very hale this afternoon.”

“I am feeling much relieved to have this business with Hannibal settled,” Grandfather said, pouring over something before
him.

“Is it settled then?” Will asked, unable to bring himself to ask what would become of him.
“Yes, all neat and tidy,” the Duke said, scrawling names down. “Nothing to worry yourself over, my dear! I’m hosting a small dinner party to celebrate Hannibal’s return and your marriage, as we never had a formal reception. There will be another, no doubt, when you remove to the Capital for the Season, but this one is for family and close friends.”

“Grandfather, I don’t think holding any sort of celebration of my being here is all that Hannibal could ask for,” Will said, voice tightening with worry as he gazed at the length of the list. “I have already quite ruined one homecoming for him. It wouldn’t do to ruin another.”

“Nonsense!” Grandfather said, chuffing his displeasure. “I have been absent of company some six years now for the sake of his temper! The least he can do is indulge me in this.”

“I have no desire to burden you, Grandfather,” Will said, his thoughts still tangled up in Hannibal’s statement, “but I need a wiser, clearer head than mine right now.”

“Well I’m certainly older, my darling child,” the Duke said, amiable with him. “What is it? Why are you so pensive, Will?”

“I think it would be appropriate if I leave Hartford House,” Will said, concern pinching his voice small, a distant echo of the frightened, uncertain Omega he’d hoped to leave behind him. “Perhaps after the dinner party.”

“Certainly not!” His Grace said, indignant. “Hartford House is your home!”

“No, Hartford House is Hannibal’s home. He is a Lecter,” Will said, feeling the pain of that statement deeply. “He should be able to live here comfortably and he cannot do so while I remain. Perhaps if I am gone he will grow bored of life in the countryside on his own and return to the life he enjoys. Will you not reconsider your decision to give the estate to me?”

The Duke’s keen brown eyes searched him, knowing he was withholding more than he was sharing but willing to let him keep his secrets if he chose.

“I am increasingly less comfortable here,” Will admitted, his voice barely more than a whisper. “In truth, I do not belong here and I never have.”

“You do belong here and I will not allow you to dash off at the first snarl from my grandson! Now, don’t fret, Will,” Grandfather said, patting his free hand but briefly, knowing very well Will disliked being touched by anyone anymore. “I will see that you are well cared for, hm? And being well cared for means having a proper introduction to polite Society. You are a noble, Will Graham, in your own right, your status from my family aside. You have no reason to hide your face here at Hartford House and Hannibal can help undo some of the damage he has done.”

“It is the damage I have done that he fears,” Will mused, still thinking of their meeting in his office, “as he is even now reviewing the ledgers for some clue of my treachery.”

The Duke snorted and laughed shortly, saying, “He’ll be lucky to find a stray penny.”

He handed Will the list he’d been working on and said, “Run along and give that to Hawkes, my darling boy. I expect he and Mrs. Henderson will organize as they always do.”

“Yes, Grandfather,” Will said, wondering what on earth the old Alpha had bartered to settle his argument with Hannibal. He could not imagine what Grandfather’s intentions were regarding his place here concerning his grandson and heir when the disposal of Hartford House was such a large wedge between them.

Troubled and thoughtful, he sought out Mr. Hawkes and handed over the list, asking, “Is this what has the staff so excited?”

“Yes, Mr. Graham,” Mr. Hawkes said, fair beaming with delight. “At long last this house will be as it was. Mind you, most of the younger staff will be quite silly, but I am pleased with the announcement all the same.”

“I confess I am not,” Will said, distracted and uneasy. When Mr. Hawkes arched a brow in polite inquiry, he said, “His Grace wishes to make this a celebration of Hannibal’s marriage.”

“You mean your marriage, Mr. Graham?” Mr. Hawkes inquired, his tone delicate. “I should think some celebration is in order. You have been six years out of Society, Mr. Graham. If Lord Clarges intends to stay, as he has said, then I expect Society will be rather more present.”

Will frowned, quailing at the thought.

“His Grace is starting small, which is some comfort, Mr. Graham, is it not?”

“Not nearly as much as banishment, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, giving him a weak smile. “Which I should prefer to Lord Clarges taking the opportunity to denounce me in public.”
Mr. Hawkes sighed heartily. “I am very fond of you, Mr. Graham.”

“As I am of you, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, his smile genuine but worn with too much thought.

“I would like to reassure you that Lord Clarges is too much a gentleman to take such action,” Mr. Hawkes told him, solid in his faith.

“I wish I could share your certainty,” Will said, exhaling on a sigh, his stomach tight with dread at the eventuality of Lecter relatives and Hannibal’s life without him descending on him in due time. He very much wished to tell Jimmy to pack for him and remove himself to another estate altogether, but no matter what happened, Hartford House belonged to him and he had a responsibility to care for it properly, if only for Hannibal’s own children.

“Have my mare saddled, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, deciding to stick to his schedule. “I’m late for my rounds.”

“Yes, Mr. Graham, of course.”

Hannibal found nothing untoward in the books. Indeed, the more he delved into Will’s work, the more admiration he began to feel. For all intents and purposes, his Omegan spouse had dragged Hartford House up by the bootstraps and forced it into screaming compliance, if the early years of his efforts were to be believed. His deft business sense had allowed for profits that stacked with each year, building on investments made the year prior. He had to hand it to him, Will Graham knew how to plan long-term and was not one to indulge in quick schemes. Tenancy was up to full capacity, and Will had, with Grandfather’s permission, even purchased and annexed packets of land from the impoverished, nearly extinct family of nobles who had once neighbored them. Hannibal was left wondering what on earth he planned to do with it.

He was well and truly astounded and, truth be told, rather ashamed of himself regarding the assumptions he’d made about Will’s intelligence. In Hannibal’s six-year absence, Will had managed to make headway no estate manager had been able to in decades. It was no big secret that great Houses like theirs were falling to decay and bad business all around them. Seeing his ancestral home thriving where others failed brought a quiet sense of pride to him. Pride in Will’s actions. Pride in Will’s keen foresight and admirable mind.

He was no simple, childlike dimwit idling away in a drawing room wasting space, air, and money. He’d seen a problem, found the cause, effected a solution, and did the job better than the man who’d come before him.

It was far better a job than Hannibal himself might have managed, he knew. He wondered if there was any way in which Will Graham betrayed his Omegan nature, as he had yet to see it.

With nothing to pick on and deprived of Will’s presence, Hannibal quietly left the tidy little office and took the path back up to the house proper, aware in a vague sort of way that there was unusual activity among the domestics. They were very much like a disturbed bees’ nest, buzzing and milling in agitation.

A footman spied him coming up and hopped to get the door, even if it was unorthodox for a Marquess to use the servant’s entrance. Several of the other house staff stared at him in consternation, caught in the middle of their cigarettes and letters, unsure how to react.

Hannibal ignored them and entered the house, moving with swift, easy grace down the hall and turning up the servants’ stairs to emerge on the main floor near the front door in time to hear Will request his horse.

“Saddle my stallion as well, Mr. Hawkes,” he called, gloating somewhat when Will was startled into looking at him, his annoyance apparent on his lovely face. It was quickly replaced with blank indifference and his face just as quickly averted, which left Hannibal scowling as he reached him.

Mr. Hawkes wisely escaped out of earshot to give instructions to a footman, leaving Will alone with Hannibal in the foyer.

Hannibal smoothed his waistcoat, aware he was grooming again but unable to prevent it, not that his mild peacocking made a bit of difference to his composed spouse.

“Back so soon, Lord Clarges? I had thought you would take rather more time to thoroughly investigate my wrongdoings,” Will said, turning away to present Hannibal with his profile and the slender sweep of his shoulders.

“Yes, well,” Hannibal said, shifting slightly as if he’d done something wrong, which only irritated him. “Naturally, I could not take the time to look through all of it. I will have the accountants come in for that, though I do admit to being curious as to why you are amassing land like a general.”
“Who knows,” Will said, cocking his head to angle an irate look Hannibal’s way. He wasn’t wearing his spectacles and his eyes were large and gleaming, the sparkling color shifting from blue to green and stormy gray depending on how the light struck.

Hannibal found it vastly unsettling to see. Proper people’s eyes did not change colors or cause a gentleman’s gaze to linger overlong where it should not. He could not fathom how Will could be so uncommon in every respect he was capable and thought it must be from sheer spite. “Though I am sure you have your sound theories.”

“Considering what I know of your capacity for violence, I shall keep my opinions to myself,” Hannibal said, too proud to admit he was brimming with curiosity to know what Will had planned, as he was far too intelligent to have made the purchases impulsively.

“If you wish to ensure your safety from my violence,” Will said, “then you have my delighted permission to avoid me.”

“Nonsense, I will accompany you,” Hannibal said, picking a bit of lint from his jacket and dropping it with a wrinkle of his noble nose. “It is Grandfather’s wish that we spend time together.”

“That was your grandfather’s wish six years ago,” Will said.

Before Hannibal could scold him for being so abrupt and surly, Mr. Hawkes returned to open the door for them to meet their saddled horses on the drive.

“Thank you, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, striding swiftly away to mount his horse with feline grace, settling into the saddle and gathering up the reins in his slender, deft hands.

“Thank you, Hawkes,” Hannibal echoed, rather shamed into it as Will was so persistently polite to the staff. Entirely uncalled for, in Hannibal’s book. He settled into the saddle and turned to tell Will as much when he realized his mate was already riding away.

As if he simply couldn’t wait to get away from him.

From him.

Offended, Hannibal urged his stallion after Will’s sturdy little mare and overtook him on the lane heading opposite Hartford Town. The dirt trail Hannibal knew from his childhood here which led on to the next town, worn flat over the years by the merchants moving back and forth over the land, had been replaced as well with cobblestone. The entirety of the area had, in his absence, been connected up to the greater roadwork. It was quite the undertaking, he realized. A road to connect Hartford House and Hartford Town to the main roads was one thing, but finding it extended past those bounds was even more impressive.

“These roads are quite an improvement,” he said, hoping to coax Will out of his silence. “It is a wonder we never had one in before now, really. It must make everything much easier for everyone.”

“It does,” Will said, a soft smile curving his full lips. Hannibal caught a bare glimpse of it before Will turned away, ahead of him enough that it blocked Hannibal’s view of his face.

“Long overdue,” Hannibal decided, straightening in his saddle and moving abreast of him. “Very clever, though, whoever brought it to fruition. No doubt the City Council.”

“No doubt,” Will said, chuckling, turning his head away again when Hannibal glanced over at him to catch a bare glimpse of his lovely profile. It brought an uncomfortable reminder to both of them of that day six years ago when Hannibal had reacted so violently to little more than Will simply looking away.

Hannibal found himself thinking of that day and frowning at his memory of Will, slight and far too young, staring up at him with tear-filled, terrified, bewildered blue eyes. It gave him a pang of guilt that refused to be quashed when its source was so enticingly present and entirely changed.

“I assumed you had better ways in which to spend your time, Lord Clarges,” Will said, riding with purpose but not precisely haste, “than waste it on me.”

“I had arranged a gap in my calendar to come deal with Grandfather,” Hannibal said, realizing Will’s destination was Gold Meadow Farm, the first of the estate’s farms let out to rent. “I will have to make further arrangements, of course, considering I intend to stay. For now, I will ensure Hartford House is not suffering from your handling.”

The halfhearted remark got the intended reaction. Will cut a sideways look at him that was quite menacing. Hannibal feigned not to have noticed, though he was pleased that his needling, at least, got a response.
“And what is our business here?” he asked instead, seeing the farmer and his older son turned out in the front yard, clearly expecting his visit.

“Every first Tuesday of the month I get reports from the dairies,” Will said, lifting a hand in greeting. “Production, headcount, the status of their needful items, any concerns they might have.”

“Goodness, how clever,” Hannibal said, brows rising, unwilling to admit to Will himself just how intelligent he found him. Unable to resist needling him, he asked, “Who told you that you should do such a thing?”

Will ignored him, choosing instead to call a greeting ahead and urge his mare faster. He drew to a stop, swung down with supple grace, and was shaking hands with the farmer before Hannibal arrived.

“Ah! Lord Clarges! I’d heard you was back, m’Lord! Riding the rounds this morning? Seeing how the old homestead is coming along, m’Lord?”

The pink-cheeked, rather round fellow beamed at him while a strapping huge lad strode off with Will towards the sheds, already in deep conversation.

It was fairly irritating to see.

“Forgive me,” Hannibal said, easing from his stallion’s back. “When I was a child, this was the Osgood family farm.”

“Oh, well, we’re the Pattons,” the man said, beaming at him. “The Osgoods moved to a bigger farm, bless ’em. Mr. Graham found them a tenancy that suited them and their hogs better and had us in, since we got the best heifers in the area!”

Hannibal looked around with critical eyes, noting the tidy state of the place, the signs of a happy and thriving home. He could see the cattle in the distance, ranging unpenned but for the bull, who was safely enclosed. The lane passed by with a neat cobblestone path from the dairy branching out to meet it.

“And does your situation here suit you?” Hannibal asked, lacking any sort of good conversation material. He very much doubted Farmer Patton was either interested in or aware of the latest opera in the Capital. “The Osgoods had a devilish time getting their meat to market, if I recall correctly.”

“Oh, aye, m’Lord, they did,” Patton told him, unmindful of a pig-tailed little girl who ran up and started swinging from his burly arm. Hannibal saw a whole passel of round and bright-eyed children slowly emerging from the house, enticed by the presence of an unfamiliar face. “But the lane here is a blessing, indeed! Halves the time to get to town, and makes it easy to reach the road to the Capital. Why, once the rail comes, we’ll be fair set on, won’t we?”

“Indeed,” Hannibal murmured, trying to parse out where on earth the rail would run through this area since all of their available land was being used.

Except the land his clever little spouse had begun parceling up in his absence.

“Not to step out of line, Lord Clarges, but I wanted to say how glad we all are that His Grace hired in Mr. Graham,” Patton said, dragging Hannibal back to their conversation so abruptly it must have shown on his face, because the man promptly added, “It’s just that he’s done so much for us, your Lordship, investing in our businesses, having all the roads built—which put a fair number of men into honest work—even setting up buyers in the Capital. We all hope once you return you’ll keep him on for all the good he’s done here.”

“This road?” Hannibal echoed, dumbfounded. “This road right here?”

“Er... yes, m’Lord,” Patton said. “It was one of the first things he did when he took over. Built the roads up, and didn’t even up the share for Hartford House, said it would pay for itself, and it has.”

“Wait, Patton,” Hannibal said, his surprise about the paved road giving way to genuine bewilderment. “Did you say you hope I’ll keep him on? I wouldn’t exactly word it as hiring him in, sir.”

There was a long, cautious silence. Hannibal could see Will returning with the farmer’s older son at a sedate walk with less urgent conversation now.

“Begging your pardon, m’Lord,” Patton said, unsure where he’d gone wrong. “But as your land agent—”

“That,” Hannibal said, pointing at Will, “is my spouse!”

Patton stared at him, flummoxed into silence.

“Why do you have that look on your face as if you’re confused?” Hannibal demanded, scowling to see Will look up at that boy, tipping his face to meet the smile of the much taller man.
“Er... ’cause I’m confused, my Lord,” Patton offered. “Not to speak out of turn, but most times a noble don’t marry their land agent—”

“He is not my land agent,” Hannibal said, frustrated. “He is my spouse! He was my spouse six years ago when he first came here, whatever he allowed people to believe afterward! Why do you still look confused?”

Patton’s eyes slid to Will. With no other recourse to soothe an addled and powerful Alpha, he said, “It’s just... Well, he’s a man, ain’t he? It isn’t every day a Duke’s heir marries a m—”

“He is Omegan!” Hannibal said, pointing at Will so that there was no mistake. “Omegan! How is this a mystery? Why has no one come to this conclusion? He is Omegan and—he is smiling.” Hannibal squinted at Will to confirm it, then scowled and looked at Patton. “Why is he smiling?”

“I wouldn’t dare say, m’Lord,” Patton told him, looking at Will with a fresh perspective. His voice was thoughtful and vague when he added, “Omegan? That explains why he’s so pretty.”

“Pretty?” Hannibal echoed, rounding on him, shocked that someone might make such an observation about his spouse. “I beg your pardon?”

“Beautiful, m’Lord,” Patton hastily corrected, no doubt thinking he had offended his future Duke with such a summation. “He’s very beautiful, m’Lord.”

“Yes, he is,” Hannibal said, surprised into agreeing, unexpected as it was. “And he is currently smiling at your son. He never smiles at me. Not in any kind of nice way.”

“I’m sure it’s just his temperament, Lord Clarges,” Patton said, thoroughly exhausted by their conversation. “He’s a solemn little fellow, truth be told. Stern as a vicar most times, but very good at his job.”

Patton flushed brick red, embarrassed to have brought up Will’s questionable status as the Hartford estate manager.

“Mr. Patton,” Will called as he reached them, irritated when Hannibal moved to insert himself between the Patton lad and his spouse. Shrugging it off as more of his nonsense, Will said, “Everything seems to be going well. Have you any particular concern for me?”

“No, my Lord,” Patton stammered, flushing harder and looking away.

“My Lord?” Will whispered, looking from Patton’s round face to Hannibal. “I see. Well, I did mean to let you know that there will be someone replacing me very soon.”

“Well, we understand, yer Lordship, don’t we?” Patton said, eager to make it up to Will. “A-and I apologize for how I’ve treated you in the past.”

“How have you treated me that you believe you need to apologize for it, Mr. Patton?” Will asked, grim and increasingly unhappy.

“Well, I mean... We didn’t know, your Lordship,” Patton said, fumbling over the words. “I mean, we never would have said some things in front of you or spoken so easy with you had we known you was a noble and an Omega.”

Will flinched, but managed to nod softly. “Yes, well, I am certain my replacement will suit everyone much better. Thank you, Mr. Patton, for your kindness in indulging me so long.”

Will quickly mounted his mare, ignoring Hannibal’s sharp call after him. Hannibal excused himself without further ado and went after him, catching up to Will in the midst of pasturage where he turned off onto a dirt trail.

“I suppose you’re very pleased with yourself,” Will said, refusing to look back at him, stiff with offense.

“Is there some reason I should be ashamed of myself?” Hannibal asked. “Why on earth did they believe you’re the land agent?”

“Because I am!” Will snapped, guiding the horse along the trail.

“Well, in a manner of speaking,” Hannibal said, conceding the point. “You have substituted in the role admirably. But they do not seem to be aware you are also my spouse. I assumed Hawkes was exaggerating when he said no one knows who you are. The townsfolk I can understand, but certainly the tenants must know! That is not a secret that would keep in such close company!”

Will said nothing, which only served to rankle Hannibal.

“Why did you never correct them?”
“To what end, Lord Clarges?” Will asked, ducking low to clear a tree branch which Hannibal nearly rode straight into, he was so intent on his mate.

“Well…” His reasoning failed him. His assumptions, he knew, would not sound the same coming from his mouth as they did in his head. “Because you could.”

“Not everyone does things because they can,” Will reminded him, letting the mare pick up her pace once they were clear of the small hedgerow. “Not everyone is like you, Lord Clarges.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Hannibal asked, annoyed.

“I am not lowering myself to a discussion with you on this subject,” Will said, aware of Hannibal’s darkening scowl. “Suffice it to say, I had no more desire to be associated with you then, Lord Clarges, than I do now.”

“Do you seek to offend with every word? You are my spouse,” Hannibal said, huffing with indignation. “Your desire to be associated with me notwithstanding.”

Will pointedly ignored him.

It was entirely unsettling.

Hannibal glowered at his back, annoyed. He could not fathom why Will had kept his status a secret. He would have imagined Will would have soundly corrected anyone who misidentified him, Hawkes’ assertions notwithstanding. His father’s concubine would have flown into a spitting rage to be mistaken for a land agent. She no doubt would have died of self-immolation to have actually performed the duties of one.

She certainly would not have done so with anywhere near the success Will Graham had.

Frowning, Hannibal cleared his throat and loudly scolded, “You should have told me the road was your idea.”

“It is infrastructure, Lord Clarges, not scientific advancement,” Will said, refusing to look back at him. “It hardly matters whose idea it was. What matters is that it is there and it does its duty.”

“Well,” Hannibal said, pride thoroughly pricked, and expertly so. “How interesting to expect the road to do its duty when you will not.”

Will did look at him then, a flash of angry, narrowed blue eyes filled with far too much consideration for Hannibal’s comfort.

He was very glad there were no trout at hand.

“Pray tell me, Lord Clarges, what duty I have failed,” Will said, gazing steadily at him. “As I recall, it was not I who left Hartford House in a snit!”

Hannibal had the good manners to flush, Will was pleased to see.

“This is the land you asked about,” Will said, back to doing brisk business. He drew his mare to a stop at the start of a flat meadow and looked out across the rolling waves of grass with the fond pride of a mother beholding their brood.

Hannibal’s eyes flicked over him and he shifted, discomfited by Will’s lovely profile. He recalled his irate exchange with Patton and bristled, thinking of Will smiling at that hulking great boy and himself defending Will’s beauty with such instant and automatic affront.

But he was beautiful. To say otherwise was a blatant lie, and the proof was present before him.

Will glanced his way, his dark brows slamming down over his bright blue eyes when he caught Hannibal inspecting him.

“If my appearance offends you, Lord Clarges,” he said, his low voice dangerously soft. “It would behoove you not to stare at me.”

“I thought you had a twig in your hair,” Hannibal said, looking at the meadow with a perfunctory air.

So much for honesty.

“And what am I to make of this?” he asked, irritably aware that he sat straighter in his saddle with his shoulders squared, spurred to present an appealing image in the face of Will’s frank disapproval. “Or might this have something to do with the rail line Mr. Patton spoke of?”

“The rail line is cutting north from Chesterton,” Will said, oblivious to his jibes and not the least bit surprised that Hannibal had gleaned his intentions. He pointed his slender finger in the direction of the town he’d mentioned. “I’ve spoken with the surveyors and seen the plans; they intend to bring the rail straight through here and on to North Larkstow.”

“So you purchased the land before they did,” Hannibal mused. “They have the law of the land.”
“I have offered them the use of the land without argument if they would place a station at the south end of Hartford Town,” Will said, soothing his mare when she shifted beneath him.

Hannibal’s brows rose with surprise. He was impressed all over again with Will’s forethought, and was forced to admit that his spouse was surprisingly insightful and bold on top of being alarmingly clever.

“The rail company agreed,” Will said, no sign of pride or bragging about him. “It will profoundly benefit your tenants and the townsfolk, and improve the distribution of their goods to their buyers.”

Hannibal absorbed that, considering all the facets to such an advantage.

“The rail line will pay for the station, of course,” Will said, taking his silence for disapproval. “And I negotiated a lifetime contract for a flat rate for any goods sent under the Hartford stamp.”

“You are very determined that our people are well served, aren’t you?” Hannibal asked, a smile tugging at his mouth when Will huffed softly, impatient with even the hint of praise.

“It was my place as the estate manager to see that the estate is productive,” Will said, turning away to give Hannibal a view of his dark curls and the delicate curve of his ear peeking out at him. “For that, the tenants must be productive. It was all necessary, Hannibal.”

“I realize that,” Hannibal said, admiring Will’s quick, decisive actions to secure the estate’s success. “You surprise me, Will.”

Will shot another glance at him, his dark glare softening somewhat when he realized that Hannibal wasn’t disapproving of him.

“You are truly unusual,” Hannibal said.

“I am practical,” Will said, blushing slightly and turning his mare to escape Hannibal’s handsome smile and his unconscious, charismatic Alpha draw. “I have a duty to ensure that this place does not suffer in your absence. So tell me, Lord Clarges, do you still believe Hartford House is teetering on the brink of ruin?”

“No,” Hannibal said, surprising Will when he reined his stallion around in front of him to get an unobstructed view of his face. “I believe you have acted with impressive verve for someone with no practical experience in running an estate. I stand corrected.”

Will’s eyes widened so much they showed white all around. His expression of stunned shock was so amusing that Hannibal chuckled softly and told him, “Even my stubbornness has its limits, Will.”

Will got himself under control and averted his face again, tipping his head down in that effacing way of his, managing to turn his mare at the same time so that he swung away towards the next farm on his rounds.

Something about his reaction made Hannibal’s grin widen, warmth blossoming in his chest for no reason he could imagine. He reasoned it was because he’d rendered Will speechless.

But deep down he knew it was because he was finding Will to be far more intriguing than he’d ever imagined.

Chapter 8

They parted ways in Hartford House once more after all the rounds were passed, Will upstairs in a preoccupied rush and Hannibal with plans to see his grandfather.

“Ah! Lord Clarges!” Mr. Hawkes said as he swept open the door, no doubt having watched carefully to time things to the second. Hannibal knew he had no hopes of catching old Hawkes off guard, no matter that he had lingered behind fussing over his stallion before handing him off to the stable hand. “Welcome home.”

“Is Grandfather up?” Hannibal asked.

“Yes, my Lord, he is,” Hawkes said, accompanying him to his grandfather’s suite and rapping smartly on the door for him, announcing, “Your Grace, Lord Clarges is here.”

“Honestly,” Hannibal said, equally amused and annoyed. He allowed Hawkes to open the door for him and strode inside, drawing up short when he saw his Grandfather at his small desk, head bent to his work. “Well, well, aren’t you feeling much improved today, Grandfather. Not so near Death’s door, are we?”
“Ha! Not as near as you no doubt wish,” his Grandfather said, angling his head to give Hannibal a grin. “I’m busy, boy.”

“Busy with what, pray tell?” Hannibal asked, coming closer to see his Grandfather working on a letter of some sort.

“What again?”

“Not in regards to you this time. We’re throwing a dinner party,” Grandfather said, leaning back in his chair to look up at his grandson, who came to lean against the desk with a thoughtful frown on his handsome face. “You look very much like your father, Hannibal. Very much like him, indeed.”

“I have rather unsteady memories of him, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, thoughts on his encounter with Will. “But I would suppose I do look like him, as I look like you.”

“Why are you here?” the Duke asked, pushing him out of his curious imaginings. “Hm? Pester?”

“I came to check on you, you old goat,” Hannibal said, smirking at the unholy gleam in his grandfather’s eyes. “Honestly, I would have thought you near expiring by now, yet here you are all dapper and young, almost as if you were having me on.”

“Well, nothing’s to be done about it now if I were,” Roland said, unperturbed. “Have you been lazing about all morning?”

“No, I was with Will today,” Hannibal said, then automatically corrected, “Rather, I accompanied Will today. I rode out with him on his rounds. Is he always so persistently engaged? I had hoped to have a chance for a quiet moment, but he scurried upstairs the second we returned. He is deadly difficult to pin into place for long. Very fixated on being busy.”

“He has his hands full running the household as well as doing the work you were to have done!” Grandfather said, scolding him. “And very well, mind you. He isn’t the boy you met six years ago, Hannibal. He’s grown up and he’s grown up well. Gave you the slip, did he?”

“Did you know he’s up before the sun?” Hannibal asked, a thoughtful frown on his mouth. He knew his grandfather likely knew everything there was to know about Will by now after six years sequestered with him, but felt compelled to add, “And all that business with the rail line. Wicked clever maneuvering, isn’t it?”

“He’s a very clever boy,” Roland said, leveling a curious glance at him to measure his sincerity. “Have you managed to be friendly with him, at least?”

“Yes, of course... well, not entirely,” Hannibal admitted, a little uneasy when he thought of how he’d provoked him earlier in his office. It reminded him of what he’d said about his mistress, Alana, and his plans for the future, which did not include the solemn, quick-tempered Omega he’d spent such an unusual morning with. Flustered, he added, “We did start off on the wrong foot.”

“He told me you were going over the ledgers,” Roland said, amused, knowing full well he’d found nothing to complain of. Hannibal flushed, rather annoyed with his grandfather’s delight in his discomfit. “I asked about the books, yes. He very politely agreed I should have a look due to his infirmity of the mind.”

Roland cackled, well amused. “And what was your summation? Can he tell his decimals from his zeros?”

“Please don’t start,” Hannibal warned, exasperated. “I can say with complete confidence I would never wish to pit myself against Will in the case of numbers. I would much rather give him a trout.”

Grandfather’s gaze turned quizzical, bewildered by the odd statement.

“I made the mistake yesterday of questioning Will and Anthony on the matter of an afternoon spent fishing,” Hannibal admitted, frowning at the memory. “He slapped me with the trout he’d caught.”

Grandfather’s lips twitched against a smile.

“He then turned around and fed it to me at dinner.”

Roland guffawed, clapping his hands once in sharp appreciation, saying through his laughter, “Oh, I very much wish I had seen that!”

“He is nothing like I imagined he would be,” Hannibal confessed, managing to mostly disguise his own amusement. “One moment he’s smiting me with a fish like an angry god and the next he barely pays me any mind at all.”

“He has very little patience with nonsense, Hannibal, which you,” Grandfather said, patting his hand, “are unfortunately filled with at times. Especially on the subject of Will’s gender.”

“I find myself goading him to see what he will do, because I can get nothing from him in the least,” Hannibal said, confounded by his observations from the day. “There was a moment where we were conversing and I surprised him, but from then on he kept his distance.”
“He is respecting your wishes, Hannibal,” Grandfather said, his amusement fading to something like sympathy as he looked at his bewildered and upended grandson. “If there is distance between you, it is because you have only ever told him you wish for it.”

Frustrated, Hannibal restlessly drummed his fingernails against the desk, mulling that one over. Even during the rest of the rounds Will had remained closed to him, a surface of calm that refused to be breached, as if one slip had steeled him against another like it.

“How am I to close that distance when I cannot know his mind?” he asked, entirely confounded. “He is impossible to read! I do not recall he was so reserved when he first came here. It seemed the least of his thoughts showed on his face.”

“Yes, well, he’s very different now,” he was told. “And no doubt happy to sharpen his claws on you. Make no mistake, Hannibal, that Omega has claws aplenty.”

“I told him I wanted to bring my daughter and her mother here and he shrugged,” Hannibal said, straightening to put his hands on his lean hips, perplexed. He looked down when his grandfather chuckled, annoyed he could find anything humorous in it. “What is so funny?”

“Ah, that explains some things. Hannibal, I keep telling you he isn’t the same boy you married,” Roland wheezed, finding it quite amusing. “What did you expect, eh? Did you want him to throw a fit? Stomp and toss things and create a row?”

Hannibal frowned, not sure how to answer without sounding foolish, especially given what he now knew about Will’s temperament as well as about Will’s character.

“You keep trying to force him to act as the Omega you’ve decided is typical and the truth of the matter is we’re all simply human, Hannibal,” Grandfather said, shaking his head. “One Omega ruined you. One Omega imprinted these ideas on you, leading you to these terrible assumptions, and you’ve been trying to pin them onto Will since the day you met.”

“He’s an Omega, Grandfather,” Hannibal quietly said, falling back on old rejoinders from habit, uncomfortable with the guilt he felt, and the anger even the mention of his father’s concubine could stir. Flushing with renewed upset, he said, “When it comes down to it, whatever feats they manage to accomplish, in the end they are what Nature has made them.”

“As are we all, yet you don’t seem to be ravaging young ladies every time you go into rut,” Grandfather scolded. “We have more self control—”

“Oh, nonsense,” Grandfather scoffed. “Yes, they are softer by nature, designed to yield with grace and be a source of comfort and beauty for Alphas, but that doesn’t make them less than us, Hannibal.”

Hannibal smirked, saying, “I can hardly picture Will yielding or comforting, Grandfather.”

“No, thanks to you,” Roland sourly said, surprising him. “Oh, don’t give me that look, Hannibal. You crushed that poor child at a time when he was still forming his own sense of self. You made him look in a mirror and despise what he saw looking back at him. He changed himself purposefully, Hannibal.”

Hannibal looked away, brows drawing together in consternation.

“That was not my intention—”

“The hell it wasn’t!” Grandfather flared, whacking him on his backside with the same sure sharpness as he had used when Hannibal was a child, shocking him to no end. “You surly brute! You wanted to make him sorry for being what he is and you succeeded. Other Omegas his age already have children, status, a home and spouse they can be proud of. Will has this estate. You took the rest from him, made him feel like it was all nonsense, pitiful, laughable nonsense. In the six years since you’ve left, I have yet to see Will deliberately catch his own reflection. You left scars on him Hannibal, on the inside where they don’t show but hurt all the same.”

“If Will is shy of his own reflection, it’s no matter to me,” Hannibal said, perhaps more sharply than he intended due to the growing guilt he felt when faced with the consequences of his actions and how deeply they had affected Will. “If anything, at least he isn’t vain.”

“He should be,” Grandfather darkly said. “You’re the envy of everyone who meets him, Hannibal, and you’re too stubborn to see it. Even though he hides himself behind those spectacles and hides his shape in bleak clothing, he can’t change the fact that he’s an unmated Omega and it burns him up from the inside out that he can’t change it.”

Hannibal drew in a deep breath, unwilling to get into an argument with his grandfather.
“He hates what he is because of you,” Roland said, smacking him again for good measure and scowling at him. “I’ll be damned if you’re bringing your mistress and daughter, cute as they no doubt are, here into this house, onto this estate, the last thing Will has that he takes any pride in. I won’t let you do that to him, Hannibal. You’ve done quite enough as it is, walking away for six years and leaving him in pieces behind you. I’m half a mind to sign it all over to him in perpetuity no matter the circumstances, just to make sure you don’t do anything more to him once I’ve died!”

“Grandfather, please, you know as well as I do that I would do nothing of the sort! And you can hardly threaten me with something you’ve very nearly already done!” Hannibal said, incensed by the mere mention of such folly and reminded all over again of why he’d left in the first place. In an impulsive attempt to push back against his grandfather’s scolding, he irritably said, “To be capable of tormenting Will, I’d have to have even a modicum of interest in that creature you all foisted off on me and, believe me, I don’t.”

Grandfather coughed then, stammering out, “Ah! Will! Come in! Come in, my darling boy!”

Hannibal flushed, realizing Will had come in just in time to hear him speak. His patrician, lovely features were schooled to show nothing, however, no outward sign he’d heard Hannibal talk of him in such a way.

More scars on the inside, perhaps.

“Excuse me,” Hannibal said, drawing a deep, calming breath. He noted with a frown the wide berth Will gave him as he moved into the room.

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude; here is my report from the farms,” Will said, barely sparing Hannibal a glance.

“It’s rude to enter a room unannounced,” Hannibal said, scowling, annoyed and embarrassed that Will had heard him say something so ungracious after the tentative peace they’d managed on their ride this afternoon.

“I merely follow the example my betters have set for me,” Will told him, and Hannibal bristled, preparing to set him straight.

“Now, children!” Roland said, deflecting the tension. “Here, I’ll take those, my dear.”

“Will you be joining us at supper this evening, Grandfather?” Will asked, handing the documents over as he was bidden and managing to thoroughly and successfully ignore Hannibal in the process.

“I believe I shall, my darling boy!” Grandfather said, effusive in his delight with Will’s presence. Hannibal wrinkled his nose, irritated by the display and uncomfortable all around.

“And have you delivered your own report on the books, Lord Clarges?” Will asked, not quite lifting his eyes. There seemed to be something in the middle of Hannibal’s chest he found quite interesting and Hannibal brushed his hand over the spot with the odd, alarmed thought that he might have something on him.

“Oh. Yes, indeed,” Hannibal said, clearing his throat, deeply aware of his grandfather watching him, ready to glower and scold if he became provoking. “Everything seems to be in order at first glance. You have done an excellent job, as I said.”

“Considering I lack what Nature has so graciously provided those who are not Omegan, Lord Clarges?” Will asked, and his eyes turned quite vividly blue and furious, fastening to Hannibal’s own amber gaze with the relentless tenacity of a bulldog. “Or considering you abandoned Hartford House to an inept estate manager? That you never once offered to help your grandfather? That there was nothing more to be done than allow an Omegan creature to muck about in things? We must be in possession of all the facts, mustn’t we? Including the fact that your stubbornness does, in fact, lack any limits, Lord Clarges.”

Roland’s face showed nothing but secretive glee which quickly vanished when Will glanced his way.

“Don’t presume to scold me in my own house,” Hannibal said, though Will’s tone had never been anything than soft and mildly inquisitive, no more weight to it than there would have been had he been asking after Hannibal’s well being. Polite, and nothing more.

“I presume nothing when I am in my own house, not yours, Lord Clarges,” Will said, the tightness of his mouth and jaw giving away his sudden ire. “Yet I cannot say confirming the facts can be construed as scolding.”

Roland wheeled his chair towards the door without a word to either one of them, Hannibal muttering, “traitor,” after him for abandoning him on what was surely to become a battlefield.

“Excuse me,” Will said, looking quite determined and dangerously agitated as he headed for the door in Grandfather’s wake. “I have work to do.”
“No, I will not excuse you,” Hannibal said, blocking the way before he could reach it, closing the door and turning the key in the lock. Will’s eyes tracked the key as he deposited it into his jacket pocket and patted it, thinking it very safe there indeed. “You seem in dire need of venting your spleen, Will Graham. I suggest you do so now before I lose my patience with you.”

“Lose your patience with me?” Will echoed, incredulous, a shocked laugh escaping him. “In what ways have I tried your lauded patience, Lord Clarges?”

“I have told you before to call me Hannibal,” he reminded, comparing Will’s vibrating frustration with the Omegas he had met since his return from the war. He couldn’t recall a single one showing even a quarter of Will’s unyielding backbone, though he could admit to having truly known very few of them. “Which you repeatedly decline to do. As I am your husba—”

“Don’t!” Will’s sharp, snarled response cut him off, and Hannibal felt renewed wariness, the trout making a sudden, unwelcome appearance in his mind’s eye. Will trembled with something very like anger but seemed more akin to pain, his fists clenched at his sides and his eyes showing white all around. “Don’t you dare claim to be my husband! You spent two days in my presence and left us here to rot! Were it not for your grandfather’s illness—which I am becoming suspiciously aware may not have in fact been so serious as he claimed—you would never have come back here but to be rid of me entirely!”

Hannibal’s mouth pursed, unable to find a suitable rejoinder when Will was so entirely truthful.

“I have spent six years shaking the dirt off of this place, allowing it to reach its potential,” Will said, gesturing around him at the evidence, even here in Grandfather’s own suite, “while you were playing the bachelor in the Capital and taking up with every female you could sniff out! And yet I am the one your precious Society fellows all laugh at behind their hands, aren’t I?”

“Be very careful, Will,” Hannibal said, eyes narrowing. “You are in danger of sounding jealous.”

“Jealous?” Will asked, roses blooming in his pale cheeks. “You mistake me, Lord Clarges, I am furious! And now I will face the gauntlet of your family come to snipe at me and pick apart my shortcomings! What polite company you will find yourself in, sir! Free to disgrace me at your whim when I, as an Omega, am expected to simper brainlessly and smile and pretend I am nothing more than some pathetic excuse for ornamentation!”

“Your list of complaints aside—” Will drew in a shocked, affronted breath “—I am willing to remain here at Hartford House and give you the child my grandfather is so desperate for.”

Hannibal offered Will a magnanimous smile, waiting for him to melt into a puddle of relief, thinking himself well secured, surely. A child to stamp the official seal on their marriage. A child to legitimize Will as his spouse in the eyes of Society. A means to ensure Will would always have a claim on him which was, Hannibal knew, the one thing any Omega truly desired at heart, even one as frighteningly intelligent as Will.

Hannibal fully expected Will to start the laborious process of making up to him now that he had what he truly wanted in the promise of a child.

“Put that down before you drop it,” Hannibal said, mystified. “You should know better than to pick up something you haven’t the strength to hold.”

Will, however, seemed quite suddenly a brawny little thing to Hannibal because he lifted that horse quite high and flung it at him with a only small huff of effort.

“What on earth is the matter with you?” Hannibal asked, surprised when it hurtled soundly against his chest. He grappled hold of it lest it shatter on the floor, shocked to his toes when Will used his distraction to fish the key out of his pocket, quick and deft as a street urchin.
“Oh, no you don’t!” Hannibal said, his voice rising with his own anger, aghast Will could manage such a thing in the first place. He hastily deposited the weighty horse into the nearest armchair and rushed to snatch hold of Will’s jacket as he wrested the door open. “You mean-tempered little termagant!”

“Don’t you dare touch me!” Will hissed, wriggling very much like a trout to escape Hannibal’s startled grip. “You have no right to touch me!”

“Goodness! Your violence is staggering!” Hannibal said, equal parts outraged and impressed to see an Omega—malleable, simpering, flirty, effervescent—once again behave in such a savage, shocking manner. He grunted when Will’s booted heel came down hard on his foot and the little minx twisted out of his grip, leaving his jacket behind in Hannibal’s fist. He darted off and Hannibal flung the discarded jacket to the floor, mouth pressed into a grim, unhappy line. He tore off after him, a strange anticipation rising up at the sight of Will’s slender form fleeing ahead of him.

Mr. Hawkes, drawn by the shouting and the sounds of a struggle, quickly turned to shoo the other servants away, not wishing to be drawn into it.

Will hit the main foyer, desperate to reach the front door, his brain stuck on fleing because it was his only option where Hannibal was concerned. Distance, safe distance, where he could collect himself and put all this unnecessary excess behind him.

He made it halfway there before the carpet beneath him was rudely jerked hard from behind, sending him sprawling face first into its soft weave.

Hannibal was on him in a heartbeat, wrestling him onto his back and straddling him, too large and too heavy to throw off.

“Good gods, you call yourself a gentleman!” Hannibal said, fighting to take hold of Will’s wrists when he got that violent gleam in his furious blue eyes again. “Honestly! I have never seen nor participated in such uncouth behavior in my life, and I survived a war, mind you!”

“Get off of me!” Will snarled, baring his sharp white teeth. Sweat sheened his skin and Hannibal could smell him again, sweet-hot and mouth-watering.

“I will not!” Hannibal said, glowering down at him. “You should be ashamed of yourself, tossing valuables about like they mean nothing!”

“You shouldn’t have locked me in!” Will said, eyes blazing. “Then I wouldn’t have had to!”

It was quite fascinating, really, the way his cheeks pinked up with effort and his blue eyes glistened with anger. Quite fascinating to think this same writhing, furious hellion had once been flung at him in the guise of a woman, trembling and uncertain and easily crushed.

Hannibal found himself holding Will’s wrists in one tight fist and reaching for his neckerchief with his free hand, seeking to unleash more of his scent. Will’s eyes rounded in sudden fury and he thrashed, hissing and spitting like an angry cat.

“You’re not my Alpha!” The words broke from him like gunfire, loud and urgent, pausing Hannibal only momentarily. They burst from his throat in a snarl of denial, as if he could break the bond he’d formed to Hannibal through sheer willpower.

“That’s hardly the point,” Hannibal said, fingers curving under the fine cloth of the neckerchief to feel Will’s heated, fear-dampened skin, sketching over the underdeveloped scent glands below his jaw in a touch that made Will wriggle.

“Stop this!” Will said, trying to writhe away from his hand, the light touch of Hannibal’s fingers bringing his warm scent floating up at last, though concerningly faint even to Hannibal’s keen nose. “You are not my Alpha!”

Hannibal realized he was bending over him, searching for his scent, very much intending to bury his nose beneath Will’s jaw to seek it out. Will’s eyes were wild with shock and fear, the whole of his slender body vibrating with shivers beneath the pinning weight of Hannibal’s heavier one. Just a taste of it, he decided, would suit him just fine. Just a taste, to match a flavor to that scent and learn it. There was no harm in such a thing. He’d done more to others during his time in the Capital, then gave them a nip to send them falling to tears and outrage at his rejection. Just a taste would surely not be out of the question considering what else he was entertaining where Will was concerned.

“Goodness, hello! I say, Hannibal, have you agitated Will again?”

Snarling with frustration at the intrusion, Hannibal lifted his gaze to see Anthony before him with the whole of the Dimmond clan ranged in the open doorway, all of them in varying states of surprised shock to see the future Duke of Westvale
pinning his unfortunate and seething spouse to the foyer floor with the ready intensity of an Alpha about to do exactly what
would please him most.

All he could offer the situation was a weary, irritated, “Damnation!”

It had not, in retrospect, been one of his more brilliant moments, Hannibal would own.

“Hannibal. What on earth are you doing to that poor child?”

He wrinkled his nose at his cousin, Bedelia, aware Will was no longer struggling beneath him, but lay frozen with
instinctive terror as the disparate scents of several Alphas overpowered him all at once, sheltered as he was. They all, in turn,
were peering at him, curious about the Omega no one but Anthony had ever seen.

“My business is none of yours,” he told her, getting one foot braced and standing to drag Will to his feet. For a moment, he
wasn’t sure Will would manage, but he did, his wrists still trapped in Hannibal’s fist and his wide eyes staring in panic at
Hannibal’s chest as the strange scents were sorted and defined. “Honestly, bursting in here this way! Is there a fire?”

“Clearly not yet,” Anthony said with a lopsided grin, earning a scowl from both Hannibal and Bedelia, the latter of whom
fanned herself lazily, delicate nose tasting the air for the faint trace of Will’s scent.

“This is entirely Uncommon!” Uncle Robert proclaimed, the emphasis not lost on Hannibal, who had seen the portly
Alpha take enormous exception to such. “Lying on the floor with your spouse in the foyer? What will the servants say!
Uncommon, I tell you!”

“Uncle Robert, thank heavens you are here as well or we would all be in danger of putting this behind us,” Hannibal said,
scowling at him, his anger at their interruption draining away. It took him a moment to realize the reason why—he was
kneading Will’s pliant nape with his free hand vigorously enough to warm his palm with pressure. If he wasn’t mistaken, by the
gradual looseness of Will’s body and the lessening of the fear in his eyes, it was soothing him as well.

“Who on earth is that boy?”

“And Aunt Grace, how delightful,” Hannibal sighed, resignation setting in as the whole of the Dimmond family put their
two cents in, every added voice and new scent no doubt battering at Will’s senses. “Have you brought the Fernhill servants as
well? In for a penny, in for a pound, I suppose.”

“That is Will, Mother, Hannibal’s spouse,” Anthony said.

“That certainly doesn’t look like any Omega I’ve ever seen!”

“Mother, hush!”

“Hannibal,” Will said, so low he almost didn’t hear him over the bickering of his Aunt’s family. But it certainly got his
attention when Will hissed his name again with crackling tension. He glanced away from the thickening mess of family at his
doorstep and down at the Omega in his grip.

The Omega who was staring up at him, not with frozen terror but with simmering indignation.
The Omega who was potentially rather agitated.
Gods help him.

“If you let them see me like this,” Will said, nearly as calm and placid as he had been in his office earlier this morning.

“There won’t be a trout one left in that river by the time I’m done with you.”

Hannibal was amused despite himself, wondering how such a small and fey-looking little beauty could manage such a
ferocious threat when he was still rather loose-limbed and pliant from Hannibal’s roughing of his nape.

He looked further, seeing all manner of dirt on Will’s shirt. He had bits of carpet fuzz in his curls, which looked as if they
were attempting to escape his head entirely. Not to mention his waistcoat had ripped open thanks to Hannibal’s weight atop
him, a single button hanging by a thread, another laying on the carpet where he’d fallen.

“You look frightful,” he said, and when the sharpness in Will’s eyes gave way to outrage, he hastily said, “I was agreeing
with you, you fractious creature!”

“Bedelia,” Anthony said to his elder sister, smiling their way, “This is Will Graham—”
“This is no time for introductions,” Hannibal said, sweeping around behind Will to block their view before they got a very good look and marching Will before him, careful not let go of his wrists lest he take a mind to kick up a fuss. “Will you people please behave as if you have manners and take yourselves to the day room?”

That got a tittering wash of laughter from them, which brought Mr. Hawkes straight away to gather them into a semblance of dignity.

Hannibal could feel Will growing more tense with every step and, once they were out of eye shot, he scooped him up around his slim waist, hefted him up off of his feet, and carried him rapidly towards his suite, scolding him, “Are you half a wolf? Good gods, I’ve hunted boar who were better-tempered than you! Stop wriggling!”

“Put me down!” Will said, his cheeks flushed red with embarrassment. “I am perfectly capable of walking!”

“Not a chance!” Hannibal told him, managing to get the door wrangled open without letting Will escape him. “We haven’t finished our conversation and we shall do so now!”

“That was not a conversation,” Will said, skittering away from him when Hannibal dumped him inside of his suite. He rounded on Hannibal, who closed the door behind him and leaned on it, warily watching him. Will, however, calmed dramatically without the threat of being exposed as foolish before unknown Alphas, and said with a slight tip of his chin, “It was an insult, Lord Clarges.”

“Considering your penchant for violence, I will not point out who was the victim of having valuables flung at him,” Hannibal said, aware of the way Will glared at him. Certainly meek and terribly malleable, was Will Graham. Entirely unsettling. “I cannot find an insult anywhere in my offer to give you a child.”

“Hannibal, you just insulted me to your grandfather!” Will said, taking a deep breath and turning away from him, the cinch of his waistcoat emphasizing his slender rib cage, even loosened as it was. “It has been six years. Do you honestly believe me so mindless that I would welcome you back with open arms? There is nothing about this situation that has changed since.”

“Everything about this situation has changed,” Hannibal said, sobering when he thought of the deal he’d struck with his grandfather. “Grandfather is aging, I am aging. An heir is needed.”

“Oh, don’t give me that old tale,” Will warned, giving him a withering look that lasted only briefly. “Your mistress could very well give you a son this time. There is no reason you can’t legitimize him. I’ve been telling your grandfather that for years.”

Hannibal’s brows rose in surprise, but Will took no notice of it, not reckoning the cause. He sent a searching glance over one shoulder, thoughtful and angry. “So tell me, Hannibal, what is the basis for your magnanimous acceptance? Wanting a child with someone you haven’t a modicum of interest in? How absurd! Why would you even consider such nonsense?”

A soft knock at the door made Hannibal leap away from it, barking, “What is it?”

Jimmy opened the door, bearing a tray with a small teapot and two cups. He settled it on the vanity with a soft smile and said, “Sorry. It looked like this called for a spot of tea, Mr. Graham. For fortification. My apologies for barging in, Lord Clarges. Will you need my help dressing, Mr. Graham?”

“No, Jimmy, please don’t trouble yourself,” Will said, still flushed and breathless.

Hannibal waved his hand at Will’s studiously composed valet, irritated by the interruption, and waited peevishly until Jimmy left once more, both of them eyeing one another with wary alertness.

“The nonsense I am considering, Will, is the fulfillment of the contract which obligates us both,” Hannibal said, retreating into cold distance for the sake of his pride, with no idea how to reach Will or where to even start. “I love my grandfather dearly, Will, and he is smitten with you. It would make him deliriously happy to have our child running around Hartford House.”

Will cocked his head, politely appalled. “Running around this house? What, alongside your own children when you move your family here?” he asked, and laughed softly, a raspy and sultry sound Hannibal found rather flustering. “This conversation is absurd. You loathe me, I have no interest in you, and this is far too ridiculous a prospect to entertain outside of a cruel joke.”

Frowning, Hannibal picked up one of the teacups and settled in the small armchair next to Will’s vanity, weighing his options. The cup was light in his hands, thin and precious and crafted to appeal to the senses.

Inspired, Hannibal held it aloft by the base and turned it this way and that to view the fading scene painted on it.

“You, Will, are like this teacup,” he said, aware of Will’s sudden stillness. “Admittedly beautiful but serving a function.”

His amber eyes were steady and weighty when they landed on Will’s pale, emotionless face.
“Your function here is to bear an heir to please my grandfather and let us all get back to our lives. Mine at Galley Field, and yours as master of Hartford House,” Hannibal said. “I understand our dealings in the past have not been pleasant, but that does not excuse us from our current circums—”

He cut off when Will crossed the room and took the fine little cup away from him. With grave, stony-faced silence, Will lifted it and dropped it to the floor where it shattered into a mess of shards.

“What the devil—"

“Tell it to gather itself up,” Will ordered him, and Hannibal subsided, looking from the shattered cup to the Omega he had compared to it. “Go on. Tell it to do its duty now, Hannibal, in the state it is in.”

Hannibal shifted, uncomfortable now that his comparison was turned against him.

“How do you think of it in such a state?” Will asked, his voice never rising above a taut monotone. “Is it functional as it is? Or has its circumstances affected it?”

Hannibal swallowed hard and cleared his throat, forcing himself to meet Will’s blazing, angry eyes.

“Perhaps,” he told him. “I understand our dealings have not always been to your benefit—”

“Tell it to be whole again all you like, Lord Clarges,” Will said to him, trembling with dangerous anger. “But it will not heed you. Make of that what you will.”

Hannibal frowned, wishing he had never drawn such a parallel in the first place.

“What I make of it, Will, is that you are a violent and disruptive menace,” he said, getting to his feet and straightening his clothing with a dignity that barely covered the fact that he was preening again, driven to self-grooming to allay his mate’s ire.

“One who will no more hesitate to trample all over well-behaved gentlefolk than you would hesitate to fling a priceless piece of china on the floor.”

Will drew in a shocked breath, eyes flying wide with outrage that Hannibal would yet again paint him a villain. He stiffened abruptly, sudden frozen calm falling over him like a mask. His full mouth tightened and his lids fell, half shuttering his eyes, which fixed on Hannibal.

Hannibal was rather more disconcerted by it than he felt he properly should be, and vastly ashamed, all things considered.

“Will—” he said, starting to formulate an intricate speech that would allude to his regret without sounding in the least bit like an apology.

“You shouldn’t keep your guests waiting,” Will said, maddeningly polite as he overrode his husband. “I will do my best to appear to advantage for your sake, Lord Clarges. If you will excuse me?”

Uncertain what to do with such a clear dismissal other than heed it, Hannibal let himself out, glowering as he closed the door behind him. Unsettling, indeed, and dangerously Uncommon, as his Uncle would put it.

“My Lord?” Berger piped up, spying him there in the hallway loitering at Will’s door like a spurned lover. “Is he not well, my Lord?”

“No, he is not well,” Hannibal said, irritated all over again at how Will had retreated into good manners, putting up walls like a fort. “He is provoking and violent and entirely Uncommon!”

“Oh, for gods’ sake, Berger,” Hannibal sighed, striding past him to reach his own suite and tend his bedraggled appearance. “Start praying, will you? My Aunt’s family has arrived and I will no doubt need all the help I can get.”

Bewildered but glad to not be in some sort of trouble, Berger said, “Certainly, my Lord. Certainly.”

Chapter 9

Thanks to the chaos downstairs and the unexpected arrival of the Dimmond clan, luncheon was forfeited and Will found he was not at all sorry. He was in no state to be in company, not while he was still trembling in the aftermath of his clash with Hannibal.

Will suppressed a shiver at the memory of Hannibal’s warm fingertips pressing along his jaw, seeking the sensitive little scent glands Will had worked so hard to render useless. His fingers had felt like coals on his skin, searingly hot and frightening,
but Will’s heart had hammered in something like excitement, with a keen kind of terrified pleasure in being pinned down and helpless beneath the weight of his bonded Alpha. Hannibal had been surprisingly rapt in his attention, his amber eyes half-shuttered and his mouth slightly parted as he’d stared down at Will, intent on seeking the source of his scent. He had worried Will even more so in that moment because he’d felt nothing more than an eager, aching desire to allow Hannibal to do anything he wanted, anything at all, as much a product of his father’s abuse as it was the response of touch-starved instincts.

Hannibal would be appalled to know it, no doubt, repulsed into turning his noble nose up so he could glare at Will down its length, haughty and secure in his confidence.

“It’s too dangerous,” Will said, leveling a glare at his reflection. If Hannibal was to find out about the bond Will had to him, then he would use that knowledge, that power he had over Will, to his own advantage. Certainly too dangerous to risk it.

Will resolutely returned to the forlorn tea set and poured himself a cup, his hand still trembling with irritation at Hannibal’s high-handed actions. He deeply regretted breaking the other teacup as he had, now that the first flush of emotion was out of him. It was his favorite tea set, long since retired from regular use for missing pieces, but one Jimmy knew he particularly liked for those very reasons. It was not priceless in the ways Hannibal had claimed, but in ways Will alone understood.

“It’s just the two of us, now,” he murmured, rubbing his thumb over the lip of the fragile teacup. “I suppose that’s just fine.”

He honestly never knew who he’d hoped would use that second cup. The staff would never serve anyone else with such a set. The fact that Jimmy had brought it into Hannibal’s presence at all was a subtle rebellion on Will’s behalf.

Yet some part of him had always found hope in the presence of that empty cup waiting on the tray, as if any moment a friend might arrive and share their time with him. It was a pleasant illusion no more, he knew.

‘You, Will, are like this teacup... admittedly beautiful but serving a function...’

Hannibal’s words had found the crack in his composure and slithered beneath, an outrageous insult said with such silky seriousness Will was still aghast at his husband’s capacity to entirely and deliberately miss his point. It had taken an example of extreme proportions to get through to his husband, and the sacrifice of something precious to do so.

“It will never be whole again,” he murmured, grim. “Not in a million years.”

Angry at Hannibal, angry at himself, Will surged to his feet and put the matter behind him. He viciously scrubbed his neck, jaw, and other scent gland areas with the liquid scent neutralizer Jimmy procured for him on a regular basis, determined that Hannibal should not have any reason to claim it was provoking.

He couldn’t fathom how Hannibal had caught his scent in the first place since even Grandfather had assured Will his neutralizer was frighteningly effective. He bleakly considered that it could be a side effect of their bonding, but he lacked the experience to know for certain and refused to borrow trouble.

He donned a fresh shirt and waistcoat, abandoning the abused ones to his vast and nearly empty dressing room for Jimmy to take downstairs. He buttoned up and replaced his neckerchief with another one soaked in the neutralizer and left to dry before being ironed free of stiffness. It was still rather scratchy and uncomfortable but he would much rather bear it than give Hannibal any cause to go running his fingers in where they didn’t belong, even if Will’s touch-starved body warmed at the suggestion.

“I am more than a bundle of mindless instincts!” Will reminded himself, tugging his cuffs and settling his jacket on, looking nearly passable enough to meet Roland’s daughter and her family. He gave his reflection a stern stare, trying to swallow down his frustration. “You are not an Omega, Will Graham. You are not a man, nor a woman. You are only yourself and that is all you need be.”

It was the only thing he could do in his situation, finish what his father had started and Hannibal had so eagerly continued, pare all of his Omegan nonsense and foolishness out with ruthless force.

In a ritual which always helped him feel more in control, Will made himself review what had happened downstairs as if watching from afar. He analyzed where things had gone wrong, what Hannibal had said to prick his temper into rising, which he seemed to have a talent for. He felt his frustration well up again—Hannibal was insufferable on a good day, most times; it was no surprise he would make such an appalling suggestion about a child with a pleased, clueless smile. It was also no surprise that, having been done in, he would give chase.
If there was one thing Will was beginning to realize about Hannibal, it was that his husband felt compelled to have the last word on a given subject.

“Insufferably arrogant,” Will breathed, cheeks growing hot when he recalled how Hannibal had tackled him in the foyer and been distracted with near immediacy by the very Alpha impulses Will’s sisters had secretly warned him of. His flush intensified when he imagined what Hannibal’s family must think of him. No doubt that he had used his Omegan wiles to seduce Hannibal right there in the doorway, unable to wait for a proper setting for a tryst.

He tugged his jacket again and quickly blotted his forehead and cheeks with the cloth soaked in scent killer, cooling his heated skin.

Hannibal had not, however—and much to Will’s surprise—left him to flounder in embarrassment alone. It had been entirely unexpected when his husband had tried soothing him with that firm kneading of his nape, and Will felt goose-flesh rise all over again recalling the touch. It had calmed him and centered him, though no little part of him resented and rebelled against it, knowing it was nothing more than mindless instinct at work. The shock of it could not compare to the surprise of Hannibal swinging around behind him, effectively hiding him from scrutiny when he had a perfect opportunity to expose Will, and he could not blame Hannibal for thinking he might struggle.

Every interaction they had was a struggle, it seemed.

His careful recollection of the instance complete, Will took a deep breath, focusing on his accomplishments and everything he had managed to date here at Hartford House to find his equilibrium again. He was no simpering, silly Omega whose only hope was in a baby. He was a quick mind bent to details who had the misfortune to inhabit a body he had no need of nor desire for. He had spent six years living as a beta male with such success nearly everyone in his limited acquaintance assumed he was one. He was not what Hannibal thought he was. He was intelligent, serious, and calm.

It was a difficult reminder to focus on when he had only just been floundering about on the floor, struggling with his husband on the foyer carpet, both of them behaving appallingly. Will knew if he’d had the time or chance to get hold of something before they’d been interrupted, he would not have hesitated to make Hannibal regret his decision to flatten him on the rug.

Somehow, his calm seemed to flee when confronted with Hannibal’s presence. His husband had no good effect on him and Will seemed to bring out the worst in him. Rather, they brought out the worst in one another. Adding a child to this nonsense was folly, and they both knew it.

So why on earth would Hannibal even consider it long enough to bring it up?

“A cruel joke,” Will said, knowing it was the only reasonable possibility. “A cruel joke and nothing more. I should leave here no matter what His Grace says. Surely he will see for himself that Hannibal and I cannot share even so large a house as this...”

And if they did clash—which was inevitable—and Roland could see there was no cause to hope, then perhaps he would consider an annulment after all.

It was the only option he could see working, one he had begged for more than once in the past six years. The Duke, tight-lipped and grim, had steadfastly refused to annul their marriage, telling Will that someday Hannibal would make all of this up to him.

But Will was entirely out of patience and he would not wait any longer, not with Hannibal back and so strangely, reluctantly conciliatory.

Nodding to bolster his renewed confidence, Will tugged once more on his jacket, lifted his chin, and quietly left his suite.

Mr. Hawkes informed him the family was in the day room and that tea and cakes had been served.

“Thank you, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, steeling himself to make a good impression no matter what they might believe of his character. “I apologize for any inconvenience my behavior caused.”

“I am afraid I am not aware of any behavior of yours that could cause an inconvenience, Mr. Graham,” Mr. Hawkes said, stern in his dignity.

Will blushed floridly. “A teacup has been broken in my room, Mr. Hawkes. Please have the pieces boxed for me and left on my vanity.”

“Oh course, Mr. Graham,” Mr. Hawkes said, ever attentive. “As for now, Lord Clarges has asked after you.”
“Unfortunately, Mr. Hawkes, he cannot pretend I do not exist when his relatives descend on us like a murder of crows,” Will said, feeling as ungenerous as his summation sounded. “I will endeavor not to give them any reason to dislike me more than gossip and conjecture already have.”

Mr. Hawkes opened the door for him and Will stopped short, eyes flicking from one to another in turn and matching them to stories Anthony had told him over the years. The slender blonde woman was Bedelia, Anthony’s eldest sister. The spare and frowning older woman was Roland’s daughter, Hannibal’s Aunt Grace, who had married Lord Robert Dimmond, the current Earl of Bredon. Anthony he knew, of course, but he was not so certain of Bedelia’s grown children, who had spouses and children of their own.

Every one of which was staring at him and almost half of which were Alphas of varying degrees of strength.

Will took a deep breath, calming when his senses sorted Hannibal and Grandfather out among them. He knew he had nothing to fear from these Alphas but their disparagement, but it was threat enough to make him nervously smooth his waistcoat over his trim belly.

“My gracious, look at you!” a young man said, beaming at him, his blue eyes wide and sparkling with appreciation. One of Bedelia’s sons, no doubt, by the look of him.

“Such a delicate young man, is he not?” Bedelia said, every nose in the room upturned to catch his scent. Will was deliriously glad he had used such copious amounts of neutralizer to confound them.

“Exquisite, Roland, darling,” a matronly woman said, nodding her approval to Roland. “Certainly an overdue boon for the family. He is the very image of Charles, isn’t he?”

“He certainly is, Margaret,” Grandfather said to her, beaming at Will with pride shining in his amber eyes and a smitten smile on his lips.

Will controlled his trembles with sheer determination, though the slight movement of his dark curls no doubt betrayed him. The married adults were nearly all older than he, interspersed with various children, all of them intensely curious about him.

Hannibal was standing near the windows but his gaze was sharp, offended, and his posture was tense enough to put Will’s teeth on edge.

“Wexley’s Omegan spouse sings like a songbird,” that same, bright-eyed youth called out. “Do you sing, Mr. Graham?”

“Oh, you’re like a lovely little jewel, darling, aren’t you?” Bedelia purred, descending on him in a perfume of strong Alpha scent and soft silks, her pleasantly pale arm rising to trail her fingers down the side of his throat, a trace of touch beneath his jaw. Will tipped his head despite his best intentions, allowing the touch and submitting to it, which made her lovely face even lovelier with delight. She turned her head fluidly to Roland and said, “Grandfather, it was badly done of you to hand him to Hannibal.”

Hannibal crossed the room in three quick strides, his hands clasped behind his back but his amber gaze livid as he said, “It is inadvisable, dear cousin, to test an Omega in such a public setting. You know how easily frightened and scatterbrained they can be.”

Will bristled, knowing Hannibal was deliberately baiting him and well aware that he’d pricked his husband right where it hurt him the most—his pride.

Annoyingly enough, Hannibal’s scent was the strongest in the room, but at least it rendered the others less intimidating and managed to be moderately comforting in that respect, however little Will enjoyed it.

“Bedelia, light of my life,” Grandfather said, sounding weary. “I assure you it was not done thoughtlessly.”

She turned her attention back to Will, her light blue eyes dancing at Hannibal’s scolding. She was a vision of pale beauty, from her light, near-white hair to her icy-bright blue eyes to the delicate shell pink of her smiling mouth.

“Come along, dearest, yes,” she crooned, petting him when no one else dared to touch him, as if his gender was contagious somehow. That, or they feared how Hannibal might react. Bedelia, however, was an Alpha much used to dealing with Omegas and soothed him with gentle strokes and murmurs, keeping him tight to her side as she sat with him near her grandfather.

“Not well done of Grandfather at all, I must say.”

“Now stop gawking, the lot of you!” Roland ordered, annoyed at their interest.
“I can hardly help it!” a young lady declared, a young and innocent version of Bedelia. “I swear, he is precisely like her! I had no idea she had a twin!”

“You were certainly not the only one without that knowledge,” Hannibal said, annoyed by how genuinely impressed they were, the traitorous bunch.

“You could change places with no one knowing!” the young man said, grinning so that he looked quite a lot like Anthony.

“Not precisely,” Will said, thinking of that awful day over six years ago when Mina had conspired to send him here in her place. “But I am sure Lord Clarges would not complain if we did, considering she is a proper woman.”

There was startled silence following his statement. Will looked to Grandfather, who was not bothering to hide his slight smile, then at Hannibal, who looked fit to murder him.

Anthony laughed, saying, “The first time I met Will, he was dressed in Lady Rathmore’s clothes!”

“Anthony,” Hannibal said, warning him. “Keep a civil tongue in your head or excuse yourself.”

Anthony said nothing more but his grin proved there was plenty he would like to add.

“Well, now that we are all together,” Roland said, wheeling his chair closer to the head of the loose group. “May I introduce Hannibal’s spouse, William Lecter, formerly Graham, the Omegan child of the Earl of Reddig.”

“Reddig?” Uncle Robert echoed, his round face crumpling in concentration. “Isn’t he the one who hunted with you all the time? You were quite close in your youth, if the stories are to be believed.”

“I was close with his father, Charles, the former Earl and Will’s grandfather,” Roland clarified. “The demands of family, unfortunately, conspired to put distance between us as we aged.”

Hannibal moved to the empty seat at his Grandfather’s side, Will across from him and nestled cozily next to Bedelia, who looked fairly pleased with herself. The rest of the Dimmond family was strung the length of the room, still curious and watchful, though the younger ones were rapidly becoming bored with adult matters.

Hannibal sighed and sipped the tea he was served, staring at Will’s studiously blank expression in mingled irritation and concern, their last conversation replaying with uncomfortable clarity. The tick of the mantle clock was annoyingly loud, rattling his desperate composure.

“Well... I can honestly say six years in Society have not improved your social graces, Hannibal,” Aunt Grace loudly announced.

He sighed again, knowing with that opening shot there would be no more peace. He carefully settled his cup back into the saucer and gave his Aunt Grace a bland, expectant look.

“The children were shocked, brother!” Margaret said to His Grace, fanning herself vigorously. “Shockingly!”

“I am aware that there were unfortunate circumstances surrounding your arrival,” Roland said, angling a repressive look at Hannibal, who turned his own on Will. “I am sure we can all agree such irresponsible and crude behavior will not be repeated in the future.”

“Still, what a sight for the children!” Aunt Grace sniffed. “What an example to set!”

“You are profoundly persistent, Aunt Grace,” Hannibal remarked, unhappy with her tenacity.

“I am afraid that scene was my own fault,” Will said, summoning such a forlorn look Hannibal nearly laughed at him. He then grudgingly recalled that Will was an Omega and such falsehoods were their stock in trade, which only left him feeling vaguely irritated and wronged on top of amused. “I took it into my scatterbrained head that I should run, you see.”

“But darling, why would you run?” Bedelia asked, making over him.

Grandfather snorted.

Anthony grinned.

Hannibal felt a dread certainty he was not going to come out of this unscathed and cursed Will’s surprisingly convoluted and cunning mind for it ahead of time.

“Perhaps you should ask Hannibal,” Will said, raising his languid eyes in Hannibal’s direction.

“Ha!” Hannibal barked a short, sharp laugh. “You scheming little minx! Don’t you dare turn this on me unless you fancy another meeting with a carpet! There is a marvelous Turkish monstrosity in the library you haven’t yet—”

“Hannibal!” Roland snapped, appalled at him. “What on earth has gotten into you?”
“I beg your pardon, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, feeling strangely flushed and upended, which he blamed squarely on the little Omega looking at him with hazy, unfocused eyes which darkened to near brown in color beneath his thick black lashes. “I find I am not myself today.”

“What an uncomfortable feeling,” Will murmured, his gaze hardening to diamond sharpness. “To not be one’s self.”

Hannibal clenched his teeth abruptly, subsiding but not liking it one bit.

“Grandfather,” Bedelia said, shifting her deceptively soft blue gaze to His Grace, a slight smile on her mouth as she expertly turned the subject. “You should have written that Hannibal had returned. We were already at Fernhill, there would have been no bother to call us here.”

“Only to me,” Hannibal said beneath his breath, cutting his amber eyes at his cousin. “Bedelia, you realize how rude it is to show up unannounced.”

“No more rude than speaking when you are not spoken to, Hannibal,” she murmured. “I addressed Grandfather, if you recall. That aside, I did send word. Through Anthony.”

“Ah!” Anthony said, grinning. “I must have forgotten to deliver it, I suppose! No matter, we are family all together.”

“Together at last!” Aunt Grace said, complaining, “Sixteen years, Hannibal! Sixteen years we’ve been waiting for you to put up or give up your place to our Anthony, and you waste six full years bandying about the Capital with your tarts, refusing to see us, when you should have been here securing the line of inheritance!”

“Indeed!” Uncle Robert said, adding his own booming complaint to the growing list of Hannibal’s misdeeds. “You are not getting any younger, Hannibal! And it is far past time for Anthony to be married! We have our own family matters that cannot be attended to until you settle yours!”

“Honestly,” Margaret said, leveling A Look at Hannibal that reminded him uncomfortably of his younger years. “Here we had assumed you would gracefully hand off to our Anthony that which you clearly do not want! And shame on you! Shame! He is a lovely Omega, quite lovely, indeed!”

“Yes, Hannibal,” Anthony said, gleeful with all the hounding going on. “I am more than happy to relieve you of your burdens. Merely say the word.”

Hannibal’s mouth tightened. He was certain Will was repressing a smile, and it was oddly irritating to see Bedelia petting him like an oversized cat, mainly because he allowed it without even a hint of violence. He should, by all rights, be flinging teacups about and snarling at people. That would certainly be an interesting distraction.

“Your opinion was neither sought nor required, Anthony,” Hannibal bit out, glowering at how smug his cousin was. “And to settle the question—you will not be taking even a one of my burdens from me, thank you very much. So you are quite free to get yourself married as hastily as possible, preferably to someone who doesn’t suit you one whit.”

Will flinched and Hannibal subsided, shifting with discomfort.

“Well, he has turned up!” Uncle Robert said, breaking the uncomfortable silence with his overly-loud approval on that count. “Uncommon though he has been, he has finally turned up!”

“Like a bit of good luck, hm?” Anthony put in, relishing Hannibal’s discomfit.

“More along the lines of a bad penny,” Will said, his voice mild and bland, his sparkling gaze lifting to Hannibal’s and showing nothing but mute fire.

There was no limpid grace here, no, as Hannibal well knew. He could look for a thousand years and find no sign of wilting or widening eyes or Omegan frailty, just a smoldering, awe-inspiring fury that refused to die down.

“Stop needling me, you perverse creature,” Hannibal said, wrinkling his nose at him in a soft snarl to cover how he had been staring. To Aunt Grace and Uncle Robert, he said, “I am here, ready and resigned to doing my duty at last, have no fear on that count.”

“Are you sure you’re Omegan, dear?” Aunt Grace asked again, peering at Will through a pair of thick spectacles.

“Grace, don’t be tiresome,” Roland warned. “Will is an Omega, and kindly cease being so rude!”

“It is nothing, Grandfather,” Will said, straightening where he sat, his spine stiff with dignity. “I realize I am not in the least what you all hoped for in a spouse for your heir and I am certainly not what Hannibal himself hoped for. I apologize for my lack of feminine charm and comfort; my upbringing was unusual for an Omega.”
“You seem perfectly marvelous to me,” the young man said, his grin wolfish. Anthony cuffed him soundly and Bedelia made a sharp gesture for him to take himself off to the back of the room, which he quickly did under their censure.

“Considering we had no chance to see you, Hannibal, last time you visited Hartford House,” Bedelia said, “you can understand how eager we were to visit.”

“Eager to get glimpse of the Omega your cad of a brother married me off to,” Hannibal said, his voice gruff, a frown pulling his mouth down when Will’s shoulders slumped slightly. They were back up in a heartbeat, straighter than before, but it bothered him to see it all the same.

“I had only mentioned I was coming over to see Grandfather,” Bedelia said, all cunning innocence. “I’m afraid once word got ‘round the whole family wished to come.”

“Such touching concern for Grandfather’s health!” Hannibal scoffed, glaring at no one in particular. “When not once in six years have any of you set foot inside Hartford House!”

“How would we dare when you forbid it?” Margaret asked, tapping her cane on the floor. “Hm? You brat! I had half a mind to take you over my knee and paddle you when I heard! And then we return to find you making sport of that poor child on the foyer floor, no less! Shocking conduct, Hannibal! Terribly Uncommon!”

“I have never banned you from this house, Aunt Margaret!” Hannibal flared, feeling put upon. “Where did you get such an idea?”

Will ducked his head again and Hannibal frowned, making a note to take it up with him later. “And I was not making sport of him, your poor child! Poor! Ha! He is a violent-tempered little harpy!”

“Yes,” Bedelia said, her mild amusement only fanning the flames of his temper. “He seems a perfect fright, Hannibal.”

Hannibal bit back his reply and settled for glowering at her, which she responded to by tucking Will closer to her side. It was a wonder they didn’t meld together right there in front of him. He half expected Will to purr from pure spite.

“I hope you will show more self-restraint Sunday, Hannibal!” Uncle Robert said, blundering his way into an otherwise dangerous conversation. “I won’t have you manhandling anyone and distracting the other guests!”

“What?” Hannibal asked, drawing a blank, his brows rising over his amber eyes. “Sunday?”

“Our garden party, of course,” Bedelia said, tilting her lovely head. “I’m afraid I sent your invitation to the Capital. I assume by now it has gone on to your other estates in search of you, though in all honesty, after six years of ignoring my correspondence and avoiding your family as if your life depended on it, I did not dream you would actually attend.”

“Ah, the lauded annual Fernhill Garden Party,” Hannibal sighed, rubbing his forehead. “I can hardly wait. As I am here, I cannot possibly refuse.”

“No you cannot refuse,” His Grace said, disapproving. “There is nasty gossip that has come to my attention and it needs to be dealt with!”

“I have no concern for gossip, Grandfather,” Hannibal said. “It is the currency in which fools trade.”

“And in which you carry a very high stock,” Grandfather snapped. “You have damaged Will’s reputation. Let us hope it is not irreparable damage. Your cousin has very kindly extended her invitation despite your churlish behavior and you will accept.”

Bedelia smiled, pleased, looking rather like a cat herself.

Hannibal wrinkled his nose at her again, a slight snarl she was well acquainted with from their childhood years.

“Then you will, naturally, be bringing Will,” Bedelia said, cocking her lovely head.

“Unfortunately, no,” Will said before Hannibal could answer, every eye in the room landing on him. Calm and serene, he said, “I will be leaving tomorrow for Marsham Heath. There is a good deal of work that remains undone there and the estate requires attention.”

There was such an air of collective consternation around him Will almost smiled at it, amused.

“Ah, yes, I’d forgotten,” Hannibal said, seizing on the excuse with fervor. “Marsham Heath is in quite a state. We’ll be leaving come morning, I’m afraid.”

Will’s eyes widened with his own consternation, then narrowed when Hannibal dropped a smug wink at him. He could hardly argue about it now but he ached with wanting to and clenched his jaw to prevent it.
“Neither one of you is doing anything of the sort!” Roland announced, his voice flat and solid. “We will go to the Fernhill garden party, all of us! We will put this ugly gossip to rest and, by the gods, we shall enjoy ourselves immensely!”

Will glowered at Hannibal, who glowered right back, each blaming the other for closing that particular escape route.

“Perhaps later, once things have quieted down, it would be more conducive to your situation to take a holiday together, perhaps to the Capital,” Grandfather said, and Will’s cheeks bloomed with rosy color when he realized his heat was coming due before too much longer. No one else seemed to notice, though Hannibal was thoroughly amused by his maidenly blushes.

Will absolutely refused to be anywhere near Hannibal when his heat came. Even being near him for so short a time, he could feel his attachment to his Alpha strengthening. His uncanny imagination instantly supplied him with every reasonable scenario of himself in such a state, and given his experience of his heats these last six years—each one increasingly more desperate—he was not about to risk any one of them. He simply wouldn’t give Hannibal the satisfaction of having his horrid opinions validated on that count.

No, he absolutely refused to be at Hartford House when his heat came; that would simply be too much ammunition for Hannibal’s arsenal and Will well knew it. Just the thought of it broke him out in a cold sweat. There was only so much coshing a gentleman could do, after all.

“For now,” Roland said, his assessing gaze not missing Will’s sudden absorption with his thoughts. “We are all decided we will attend the garden party and have a lovely time.”

There was a moment of silence that followed his gruff command, one broken by Anthony, who said, “Will, would you play for us?”

He was on his feet before the request was complete, glad to have an excuse to sit alone away from so many distracting people. He ignored the burning weight of Hannibal’s amber eyes on him and settled at the harpsichord, setting up sheet music and playing softly as the family caught up behind him.

It was soothing and chased his tension away, his fingers skimming lightly over the keys, a small smile curving his mouth. A shadow fell over him and he looked up in time to see Anthony arrive. Without asking, the young Alpha sat down on the bench next to him and turned the pages in companionable ease, offering only, “They are dreadfully boring.”

Will laughed under his breath, knowing Anthony would much rather be riding or hunting or on his way to the Capital to gamble at one of his clubs.

“They are currently discussing my marriage prospects,” Anthony said, looking over his shoulder at his family. “Dreadfully boring.”

“You should have more interest,” Will suggested, smiling at him. “Whoever she is, she’ll be with you for life.”

“And I her, though men are allowed more options than women,” Anthony mused. “Don’t fret over it, Will. I have someone who suits me very well.”

Will skated a glance his way, laughing again when Anthony said, “And if you won’t marry me, why, then, I have someone already picked out, provided your blasted husband agrees.”

“Honestly, it’s no wonder people thought I was your lover,” Will said, shaking his head, his fingers skimming the keys in automatic response to the notes. Even half-attentive, he still managed to make the harpsichord sing with vibrant melody. “The way you go on. You’re a terrible flirt, Anthony. I do hope once you marry that you’ll show her more respect than to make eyes at everything with a pulse that comes near you.”

“Or them,” Anthony said, waggling his eyebrows at Will when he glanced over at him again. “A few Omegas are on offer for me, remember? I’ve no interest in swaying them one way or another—pants or skirts, it’s all the same to me. It’s what’s under the clothing that counts.”

“Your grandfather would whip you for such talk,” Will scolded, moving his hands to his lap when he finished the song. He gave Anthony a repressive look, adding. “You are a gentleman, Lord du Maurier, pray act like one.”

“Then I shall, in a very gentlemanly manner, leave this room and go have a cigarette,” Anthony whispered, grinning. “Care to join me?”

Will smiled and, without a backwards glance, gladly joined Anthony in leaving a room which he had no place or purpose in.
Hannibal listened to his family discussing Anthony’s potential mates with only half an ear, frowning at the sight of Anthony and Will sharing the harpsichord bench. Will found his cousin amusing, that much was obvious, by the way he smiled and spoke. He played very well, the harpsichord making the somber piece rather more merry than was intended.

“Hannibal? What is your opinion?” Bedelia asked.

“That you should marry Anthony to the ugliest heiress you can suss out,” he shot back, annoyed at the interruption. He bristled at the way his cousin’s shoulder brushed Will’s, and added with sharp irritation, “As quickly as propriety allows for!”

“You cannot possibly still be angry at your cousin for doing as he was told,” Aunt Margaret said, disapproving. To His Grace, she said, “My dearest brother, I had hoped you would speak in Anthony’s defense!”

“Maggie, now is not the time,” Roland said, quelling that particular discussion. “We must concentrate on Anthony’s pending engagement.”

“Hannibal—”

He stood, ignoring Bedelia’s second attempt to gain his opinion, and moved towards the harpsichord with every intention to sit between them if needs be, blaming his pride rather than his instincts for wishing to separate them.

He got no closer than a few paces before Anthony stood and, with Will right behind him, quit the room without a word, every foolish Dimmond under the age of thirty running off after them and glad of their sudden, fortuitous escape from the boring matters that plagued their elders.

Incredibly annoyed by their behavior, Hannibal reluctantly rejoined the family, wondering what on earth the two of them were up to and why on earth he gave a damn.

Amidst a small flurry of young Dimmonds, Will and Anthony managed to make their way to the garden, idly watching the youngsters take up an unruly and confounding game of pall-mall with no discernible rules, teams, or points system. They played for the fun of it, enjoying the afternoon sun and their youth.

Even though he was barely older than some of them, Will felt removed from their carefree enjoyment, aged by his heavy thoughts and circumstances.

“You’re frowning,” Anthony said, standing with Will in the shade of an arbor placed for spectators.

Will softened his expression with a smile, saying, “I was thinking. I find my thoughts distasteful recently, now that Lord Clarges has returned.”

“Lord Clarges,” Anthony snorted, amused. “He is your husband, Will; you can call him by name.”

“He has told me to, but he does not see us as equals,” Will murmured. “It would only rankle his nerves were I to call him by name.”

“Then rankle them,” Anthony suggested, grinning at him. “Gods know he’s caused you enough grief. There’s no harm giving some in return.”

“I have no wish to cause him grief,” Will said, smiling when the smallest of the children stepped on the hem of her dress and sprawled onto the lawn, only to sit up laughing. “I have caused this family too much grief already.”

“You should, by all rights,” Anthony said, his humor slowly draining to irritation with his cousin. “After all he’s done.”

“He’s been well within his rights,” Will said, mouth pursing. “I should not resent him.”

Anthony regarded him in silence. When he spoke again, it was a low, urgent whisper so the children wouldn’t hear.

“Will, regarding what I said inside just now... I’m going to make a decision tomorrow,” he said, the seriousness of his tone making Will look over at him. “If you have any inkling to escape what Grandfather and Hannibal have done to you, tell me now.”

“Anthony—”

“I mean it, Will. I’m being absolutely serious, not flirting in the least,” he said, leaning close to grasp his shoulders. “I’ll not be Grandfather’s heir, I know that, so there’s no fear on that count. We could leave, now even. Just go and let them do whatever it is they need to do to untangle you from Hannibal.”
Anthony, I appreciate that you’re trying to save me,” Will said, touched. “But there’s no point in sacrificing your standing with your family for something like me—”

“Someone,” Anthony said, giving him a soft shake and uttering a huff of disbelieving laughter. “Gods, listen to how he has you talking! You’re a person with feelings, Will. Feelings Hannibal has dismissed without a moment of regret. I know we regard one another as nothing more than friends, but given time I am certain we could love one another. You’re amazing and funny and delightful and I wouldn’t regret a thing if you’d marry me.”

Will’s eyes misted with tears and he pressed his hand to his heart where it ached, wounded and wretched, his vast affection for his dearest friend tightening his chest.

“You would regret it, Anthony,” he said, managing to meet his gaze. “Because I’m bonded to Hannibal.”

Confusion and understanding flooded Anthony’s blue eyes. Brow furrowing, he asked, “When did you—”

“We didn’t,” Will hastily said, flushing. “We haven’t. If I have my way, we never will. It happened the day after you brought me here. There was an awful moment between us and it just... happened.”

“Well,” Anthony said, giving his shoulders a squeeze. “That explains so much about you. I’d thought a time or two that perhaps the two of you had bonded—”

“Not the two of us,” Will corrected, wincing. “Just me. Please don’t tell Hannibal, Anthony. If he knew—”

“Gods, if he knew, he’d break you all over again,” Anthony said, his tender expression turning grim.

Will nodded, drawing a deep breath to calm himself comforted by Anthony’s warmth and nearness and wishing things could have gone very differently.

Anthony squeezed his shoulders again, gaining his attention once more. He smiled at Will and asked, “Partners in crime, then?”

Will nodded vigorously, grinning when Anthony laughed and hugging him back without restraint when Anthony embraced him.

“Well then,” Anthony said, setting Will back only enough to make room to roll a cigarette. “If that’s your final decision, then let me tell you about a lovely certain someone who won’t reject my ardent and smitten proposal.”

Will laughed and said with vast affection, “By all means, Anthony. By all means.”

Chapter 10

The Dimmonds did not stay for supper with the exception of Anthony, but Hannibal suffered through it all the same.

Mrs. Pimms, ready to either kill someone or drop into a dead faint from all the disruptions to her service, delivered them a delightful supper Grandfather made much over in order to keep the atmosphere light. Will, despite Anthony’s insistent chatter and determination to engage him, remained silent and thoughtful in his place across from Hannibal, only leveling the occasional, dangerous glare at his husband when Hannibal chanced to remark on Anthony’s persistent attention.

Hannibal was glad to see his cousin go back to Fernhill, damn him, and was oddly disappointed when Will excused himself from a nightcap in the White Drawing Room with Hannibal and Grandfather.

“Does he often do that?” Hannibal asked, frowning at the empty doorway where Will had softly bidden them both a good night.

“Leave rooms?” Roland asked, smirking. “Yes, quite as often as we all do, I’m afraid. He’s rather limited by his circumstances in that respect, bless him.”

“You’re certainly in good form,” Hannibal observed. “No, I mean does he often excuse himself from company?”

“He is not often in company,” Grandfather said. “These past six years he has been as a stranger to me, no matter my attempts to engage him, though he has never refused my requests for his company. He has his quiet hobbies, his fishing, his work here. He is as content as he can manage, but he keeps very much to himself unless I ask after him particularly. Half of the time even the servants have no idea where he’s off to.”

“That is rather cunning of him,” Hannibal said, annoyed by how guilty that made him feel. Will’s time here had not gone at all as he’d imagined.
“Only you would see it as such, Hannibal,” Roland sighed. “He is a gentle, intelligent, and quiet young Omega and would suit you quite well if you would but allow it.”

Hannibal frowned, peering into his glass as if it might offer some insight.

“Why is this the first I’m hearing of your interest in Will’s family?” he asked, swirling the liquor around before taking a swallow, cutting a sly look towards his grandfather.

“It was all long before you arrived here at Hartford House,” Roland said, a somber, poignant sadness draining the weight of his years from his lined and weary face. “The last time Charles and I had any exchange of depth was shortly after your birth, in fact. It was then that we drew up the contract between our families.”

Hannibal arched a brow. “My, my, aren’t we feeling rather vague on details.”

“We may be as vague as we like,” Grandfather reminded him. “As we are old and lament the loss of our youth.”

“Which this Charles was a large part of, I take it? Perhaps I should ask Aunt Margaret?” Hannibal asked, willing to risk his grandfather’s scowl. “She seems to know a bit more than you’re willing to tell me. It is strange to be so close to someone and never speak of them.”

“There are things in the world we love that are too precious, too dear to us to parse down into words, Hannibal,” Roland said, the weighty sadness in his voice surprising his grandson. “Suffice it to say, age descended on him much sooner and much more viciously than it has on me. My only regret is that I was not with him when he passed.”

It made Hannibal curious about this man he’d never heard of, this man who had been so dear to his grandfather. He wanted to ask more, but it obviously distressed him and Grandfather seemed so fragile in that moment that Hannibal didn’t dare.

“And on that note,” Roland said, putting his unfinished drink down with a hand that trembled slightly. “I am going to bed. We have a party to attend soon and we all need our rest.”

Hannibal bid him goodnight and finished his drink. Feeling restless and at loose ends, he abandoned the drawing room for the library, glad to see a few lamps were lit and casting a cozy-warm glow over the plush surroundings.

Will saw his husband come in and close the door behind him and wished he’d taken his book upstairs. He was moving just as Hannibal swung back towards him and both of them froze, momentarily startled into stillness when they came face to face.


“Why should you? You have your own habits, after all,” Hannibal said, recovering quickly. He squared his shoulders and moved to take the chair opposite Will, lifting his hand in a staying gesture when Will made as if to leave. “Please, stay where you are.”

Will subsided into the comfortable chair, his book in his lap, his thumb running over the spine as Hannibal settled before him. Will looked to one side, ignoring the easy way Hannibal sat with his booted ankle crossed atop his opposite knee and his arms loose on the armrests in the spread-open habit of an Alpha used to taking up space. Will felt much smaller by comparison, sitting as he did with his legs crossed at his ankles and his arms in his lap, making himself a smaller target from force of habit.

Hannibal considered Will’s delicate profile, the nub of his nose and the fullness of his mouth above the soft curve of his chin. He was not so small as his delicacy had first rendered him; he was trim and spare in his movements with a tendency to hold his posture in tight, stiff control, which created the illusion of being smaller than he was. His ear peeked from the thick locks of his curls, a flash of pale skin against hair so dark brown it was nearly black in the faint light. He was quite a beautiful person, as Hannibal was forced once more to admit. Comely enough to argue the point with a stranger, no less.

“You were very quiet at dinner this evening,” Hannibal said, his frown fearsome when he recalled how Anthony had pandered to Will at the table, grinning and easy with him in ways which Hannibal could not manage.

“I had nothing of interest to share,” Will said, wishing him away.

Hannibal’s mouth quirked in a smile and he said, “I doubt that very much.”

Will was startled into looking at him, a furtive flash of blue eyes wide with surprise that died quickly under the weight of suspicion.
“Has my grandfather ever discussed with you the nature of his connection to your family?” Hannibal asked, his amber eyes tracing the curve of Will’s jaw when he turned his head away again. There was a stubborn set to his chin that suited him, feeding up into his full lower lip the way it did. When Will’s mouth parted for him to speak, Hannibal started a little, made aware he had been staring.

“I have never heard of a connection between our families until today,” Will said, feeling Hannibal’s gaze almost like a physical touch. “I had no idea our grandfathers ever kept company, nor did my father, not that he ever admitted to. Mr. Stammets’ arrival with that contract was quite a shock for him.”

“I admit to being unreasonably curious at any given time,” Hannibal said, his scrutiny falling to Will’s hands and long fingers, which had played the harpsichord with sensitivity and grace. Almost as an afterthought, he added, “But Grandfather is being cagey.”

“It is his own business,” Will said, curling his fingers around the book in his lap to avoid Hannibal’s gaze. “If he does not wish to share it, then he has no obligation to.”

“Aren’t you the least bit intrigued by it?” Hannibal pressed. “The fact that our grandfathers were close? I had imagined there was some type of monetary or land alliance they sought in producing that damned contract, but it would appear to be something else entirely.”

“There are many things in life that are quite different than they appear to be, Lord Clarges,” Will reminded him. An unexpected smile curved his generous mouth when he said, “And your grandfather can be very determined in some things.”

“You needn’t tell me that,” Hannibal said, irritably thinking of the stubborn old Alpha who had maneuvered him with the effortless talent of long expertise.

Will’s glance lingered into a look, assessing. His voice was soft and almost vague when he said, “He has twisted you into an untenable position and set you at odds with yourself. How terribly frustrating that must be, Lord Clarges.”

Hannibal shifted with his sudden scrutiny, surprised to hear him speak so. “You show surprising insight, Will. It’s unusual to find it in one so young.”

“I am merely what my nature dictates, Lord Clarges,” Will said, his nerves putting a bite in his words as his father’s rebuke came to mind. Nonsense, he’d always called it. Something to be dampened down lest it offend those around him.

Recognizing Will was on the offensive, Hannibal gruffly reminded him, “Do try to call me by my name.”

“We are not well enough acquainted for that, I think,” Will said, shaking off the momentary haze of his perception. He realized Hannibal was looking back at him and directed his attention back to the Turkish carpet Hannibal had threatened him with earlier.

“I am your—” Hannibal broke off before he could finish, remembering how well his declaration had gone in Grandfather’s suite this afternoon. “There are documents which say otherwise.”

“Documents do not make people acquainted with nor contented with one another,” Will said, tightening his grip on his book with every intention to get up and leave. “Please, excuse me. I have no wish to do battle with you again today.”

“Sit down,” Hannibal said, aggravated by the way Will continuously attempted to quit whatever room he happened to find the two of them sharing. It put an unexpected Alpha bark in the words and his spouse stiffened with offense.

Will stood from sheer stubborn defiance, shoulders tight and straight. “I will not and you had best not test me, Lord Clarges. I have no intentions of becoming any more familiar with the carpets of Hartford House than I am just now!”

Hannibal almost smiled at his bravado, thinking him rather foolishly brave in attempting to pit himself against a stronger and altogether bigger man. The smile was mitigated, however, by the reminder that Will, despite his smaller frame, had very nearly thrown him off in the foyer and had done a damned good job of retaliating when cornered.

“Have you a trout hidden on your person?” he asked, chuckling at how irritated his little mate was. “Or, perhaps, a teacup? It is unwise to talk bravely when you are unarmed.”

“I have my mind, Lord Clarges,” Will said, the sharpness of his voice shredding Hannibal’s momentary belief that he could be predictable in the least. “I am never unarmed.”

Hannibal had to concede the point.

“Yes, you are a frighteningly intelligent little thing,” he said, watching the minute play of expressions on his spouse’s expressive face
“Little thing?” Will bristled, tilting his head to one side, amazed at him. “Can you actually hear yourself speak or is the sound drowned out by the noise of self-admiration?”

It was Hannibal’s turn to gain his feet, admiring the fact that Will didn’t budge an inch. He was certainly a determined and angry bit of fluffy curls when he was properly riled, and shockingly easy to move to defensive violence.

“Have you any other nasty observations to make of my character? Hm?” Hannibal asked, just to see what he would do, knowing very well he was risking having the book in Will’s hand flung at his head. “Considering you know me so well?”

“I needn’t know you well to know how well you think of yourself,” Will said, meeting his stare with a steely one of his own. “You do as you please, Lord Clarges, and your actions speak to your character!”

Hannibal laughed, the situation having shifted to hostility so quickly he couldn’t quite pinpoint where he’d gone wrong. “We are speaking of actions, now, Will? Because I have many questions on that count.”

Will said nothing, only wrapped his arms around himself in a dismal, unconscious act of self-soothing, the book wedged tightly to his chest.

“Ever since my return I’ve been piecing together a very strange picture of your time here,” Hannibal said, advancing on him. “Your pathetic excuse for a monk’s wardrobe, your absence from proper company, your taking on the land agent’s work, your insistence on being called by your birth name—it makes me wonder what you hoped to accomplish.”

Will paled at his tone, as if Hannibal found it all a staggering bunch of allegations that summed up into vicious intent.

“If you had some goal in mind, Will, that I might someday yet return?” Hannibal asked, feeling entirely ungenerous with him after the events of the day. “Were you hoping your pious acts would compel me to overlook a marriage I neither wanted nor asked for? An undesired and repellent marriage I was forced into without so much as a warning?”

For a triumphant moment he thought Will might fight back, might show that amazing temper of his.

Instead, Will quietly asked, “What did you expect I would do when you made a public mockery of me by packing your bags and leaving your ancestral home rather than spend one more moment in my presence?”

A faint tremor of pain coursed through him when Will thought of that awful day and what had followed with such devastating rapidity. Sweat broke out over his brow and upper lip, a flush of pink in his cheeks telling to the spike in his temperature. “You are public property, Lord Clarges. When you so much as sneeze, it makes the papers. You stamped me with your disapproval for all to see, like a heifer with a brand. I was not welcome anywhere, by anyone. Did you think I was here in your absence throwing parties? Purchasing a new wardrobe every Season? Making calls and entertaining myself on your coin?”

Hannibal frowned, unwilling to admit he had imagined just that—his brainless and encumbering spouse frittering away a fortune in gleeful ignorance of what happened in the world around him.

“No one would attend any event I held; they wouldn’t dare risk your ire in doing so,” Will said, closing his eyes against an unsettling roll of nausea, suddenly far too warm. “No one would see the state of my clothing because no one would step foot in this house to be tainted by your distaste. No one would accept a call from me, Lord Clarges, and share my ostracism from Society. Was that not precisely what you hoped for? To isolate me into repentance for my sins?”

The tremor spread to his voice, a wavering he could not even now control, and cursed himself for.

“Well, I repented, Hannibal,” he said, his arms dropping as he abandoned any attempt to soothe himself, hardening to the task at hand as he had throughout the entirety of his life. “I have made myself as absent from this house as I could under the circumstances, given that your grandfather would not allow me to go back to my father, and you have the audacity to scold me for it?”

He lifted his head, blue eyes sheened with tears but blazing, finally blazing with his powerful, awe-inspiring temper.

“I had no choice but to use my own name! As if I could ever be persuaded to take yours!” he said, fingers clenching so hard on his book that his knuckles burned white. “I had no choice but to take the position of estate manager and make amends to your grandfather somehow, to be useful. The people here accepted me, Lord Clarges. They invited me into their homes. They shared their worries and triumphs with me and in the course of a single day you took all of that away from me.”

He took a deep breath, the sudden silence ringing in his ears. Hannibal’s amber eyes stayed steadily on him, unflinching and unmoved. The same eyes that had looked at him with loathing the day Will bonded to him. The same eyes that had stared impassively at his vulnerable, nearly-naked body before he’d ordered Will out of his presence.
“But I suppose that is little enough compared to what I stole from you,” Will said, his anger leeching away to leave him numb, the warmth dissipating from his skin. “I am a thief, Hannibal, as you have so pointedly said in the past. I have no right to live in this house or claim your name. Indeed, I have no desire to burden myself with the name of a man who has so little respect for me or others like me!”

Hannibal could see him trembling, but it wasn’t from fear, not anymore.

“But that doesn’t change the fact that Hartford House belongs to me,” Will reminded him. “Dragging it from the brink of ruin and making it prosper? That is what I hoped to accomplish.”

Hannibal frowned slightly, his conscience twinging in a way that was becoming increasingly and concerningly more frequent now that he had come home. His thoughts over the past six years in regards to the Omega he’d left behind him—when he could be bothered to think of Will at all—had been anything but kind. The consequences of his actions would in no way make this easier on either himself or on Will, he knew.

After a long, pregnant silence, Hannibal softly said, “Well. It seems you have an uncanny ability to render me speechless, Will.”

Will turned his back to Hannibal, ashamed to have lost control. He felt ill somehow, too warm and sickened, easily driven to violence or upset by his husband. He longed for the numbness that had engulfed him six years ago and kept him insulated from this awful excess of emotion.

Retreating into icy reserve, he said, “You removed yourself once from an undesirable and repellent marriage to an undesirable and repellent Omega, Hannibal. I expect you to do so again, as we should all exercise those actions at which we excel.”

He did not slam the door when he left, much to Hannibal’s surprise. He could not, even in that, be counted on to be usual, it would seem.

Hannibal exhaled deeply, frustrated, wondering why his usual easy charm always abandoned him to bad temper when he was near Will Graham.

It took Will a very long time to shake off Hannibal’s influence after their clash in the library. His irritation was like a furnace inside of him, newly discovered at Hannibal’s arrival and slowly heating him from the inside out. He was overwarm and irritable, confounded and hurt and angry all at once, in such a flux of emotion it was little wonder his skin felt too tight and hot to suit him. When he eventually did sleep, it was plagued with nightmares of his father, deep dread, and the phantom of that cliff.

He woke up still irritated, an unusual enough occurrence for him that Jimmy remarked on it, arching a blond brow in that way he had which invariably coaxed a smile from his young Lord.

“I see your run-ins with Lord Clarges are bearing fruit,” he said, flinging his way into Will’s dressing room to pick through his clothing. After three years of insisting Jimmy not rise so early to assist him, Will had given in to his pleasant, dedicated valet’s insistence on doing just that. “Though not the fruit he might have an eye for.”

“Mr. Graham, I have a plethora of opinions on that subject if you’d like to hear,” Jimmy offered, his voice echoing from the empty depths of his dressing room.

“No, Jimmy, thank you, I’ve had quite enough of opinions lately,” Will told him, stifling a yawn. “I should go to the office.”

“His Grace would prefer you didn’t,” Jimmy said, poking his head out to give him a steady look. “Work can wait, he said. You’ve a party to attend soon, Mr. Graham, remember?”

Will sighed, pacing slightly, toes curling against the cold nap of the hand-woven rug.

“I do wish you’d let me have the girls lay a fire—”
“No, Jimmy, it’s far too early to bother them and I don’t need coddling,” Will said, but he didn’t resist when Jimmy draped his dressing gown over his shoulders before returning to Will’s closet. “What are you doing in there, anyway?”

“Inventory,” Jimmy said.

“Grandfather wants an inventory of my clothing?” Will asked, surprised.

“No, I do.”

Will jumped when Hannibal spoke from behind him and spun around to find him standing in the open doorway to their shared washroom, still in his own nightclothes and robe. His hair was tousled, which peeled a few years off of him, reminding Will quite painfully that Hannibal was not so old as all that, in fact.

“I beg your pardon, Lord Clarges, but once more you have wandered into places where you do not belong,” Will said, resisting the urge to pat his own wild curls flat. There was simply no taming them without a good deal of water and a heavy comb, however, and well he knew it. “Shall I have Jimmy label the doors for you? I will insist he use very large print so you may read it.”

“Oh, yes, please do,” Hannibal said, smirking and rather pleased he was so sassy so early in the morning when most people didn’t have their wits about them. “As I am clearly suffering from infirmity of age.”

“Believe me, my Lord, we are all suffering from your infirmity of age,” Will said, annoyed and aware he was en déshabillé, though he knew well enough how little impact that would make on Hannibal, considering what had happened during his ill-conceived seduction.

“Is there any hour of the day in which you are pleasant?” Hannibal asked, making no move to quit the room or venture further in.

“Whatever hour of the day I am not in your presence, I fear.”

Hannibal closed his eyes and slowly took a deep breath, reminding himself that Omegas were delicate, frail creatures without the ability or motivation to save themselves and Will Graham was certainly none of those things, and he should no more want to throttle his mate than he should want to choke a child.

But gods was it tempting sometimes, even if Will would quite reasonably react with violence.

“Behave,” he warned, pleased when Will chose to glower at him. “I am in no mood to spar with you this morning, Will Graham. You there, Jimmy, what is the result?”

Jimmy promptly emerged and handed Hannibal the list he’d made, which was dreadfully short and appalling.

“I see,” Hannibal said, reading it by the light of the taper Jimmy politely held for him. “And have you some aversion to clothing I am not aware of, Will? You have astonishingly little, considering.”

Will bristled. “Considering what, Lord Clarges?”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Hannibal said, pinning him with a firm look. “Contain that tongue of yours, Will, or I’ll find better uses for it.”

Will’s brow furrowed with confusion quickly followed by a blush, which Hannibal took gleeful note of, even if it was more angry than embarrassed.

“So, there’s a way to curb your surliness after all,” he observed, returning to the list. “This is all of it, even from storage?”

“Every bit, my Lord,” Jimmy said.

“And it’s all funeral garb?”

“Er... Mr. Graham is not particularly fond of color,” Jimmy said, hedging his answer.

“I have no use for such frivolous nonsense,” Will said, irritated, “and you have no cause to be inquiring into the state of my wardrobe!”

“I have, I do, and I will,” Hannibal said, arrogant and short with him. “We are attending an event at Fernhill, in case you have forgotten, and Grandfather hopes to allay some of the gossip that apparently abounds in regards to us. Your dressing like an undertaker will not further our cause.”

“I have no wish for your charity, Lord Clarges,” Will said, clutching his robe up around his throat, aware of the weight of Hannibal’s eyes when they landed there, searching and attentive. “And no need of your interest. My wardrobe will suffice—”

“Unless you are being buried, Will, it will not,” Hannibal said. “You will dress and meet me downstairs. We are going into the village. I am sure Mister Avery can accommodate you.”
“Would it not be more true to form, Lord Clarges,” Will said, his voice sweet enough that Hannibal was immediately on guard, “if I wheedle you?”

“You have my permission to revel in the flow of my generosity,” Hannibal said, disapproving of his beliefs being tossed in his face with such painful accuracy.

“How delightful that my plan to access a fortune I have had no hand in amassing is coming together so easily!” Will said, glowering and equally annoyed.

Hannibal leveled a glare at him and Will stretched a bit taller, refusing to bend. “Perhaps I should stop at the tack shop while we are there and purchase you a muzzle?”

Will pointed at the door and said, “Out. Don’t think I can’t lift that table and don’t think I won’t.”

Hannibal smirked, knowing it for an empty threat, but left all the same, wondering why Will’s prickly nature was so amusing. He certainly was an abrupt and surprising young man. Hannibal looked forward to seeing Will in polite Society and wondered just how his odd little spouse would handle all those irritating people who had snubbed him for six years.

Will was dressed and downstairs before Hannibal, standing stiff and straight, staring off into space as if occupied by his thoughts. He cut a striking figure there in the early morning light, slender and composed and silent.

Hannibal strained to recall how Will had looked on the day he’d first arrived to Hartford House. Smallish, he thought. Rather, very small, young and not yet into his full growth. He’d seemed childlike to Hannibal then, a reed-thin but softly rounded bundle of nervous responses keyed too tightly to Hannibal’s Alpha draw. He’d been too young, then, yet Hannibal had not treated him with the kindness and understanding his extreme youth had required.

And before him stood the result, a solemn and reserved Omega who avoided looking him in the face at all costs when not exploding into impressive and delightfully uninhibited violence.

“Agonizing over a day’s work left unfinished, are we, land agent Graham?” Hannibal remarked, noting how Will started, taken by surprise by his arrival.

“Hartford House requires the full of my attention,” Will said, managing to slide out of his reach as Hannibal gained the entryway and headed for the door.

“You were eager enough to leave it for Marsham Heath,” he said, nodding to Mr. Hawkes, who swept open the door for them.

“You said you are here to stay,” Will said, striding out into the wan morning light. “I assumed you would take over running the estate or else hire someone in.”

“I do intend to hire someone,” Hannibal informed him. “I also intend for you to have your hands full quite soon.”

He glanced back at Will, who looked troubled and thoughtful. Smug, Hannibal descended the stairs to where Peter, their groom, waited with their horses. He mounted, settling into the saddle to watch Will, who pulled up with easy, athletic grace to sit erect in the saddle, his shoulders straight and squared.

“Walk on,” Hannibal urged, clucking to his stallion, Will’s own mount falling into pace next to him.

The morning sun grew stronger, chasing away the clouds. Hannibal tipped his nose to the soft breeze, enjoying the tang of country air flooding his senses with so many differing and wonderful scents.

“This truly isn’t necessary,” Will said, breaking the long silence between them.

“Of course it is,” Hannibal told him. “You have had no proper exposure to Hartford Town as a member of the Lecter family and it is important for them to understand your true position here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, this isn’t about my position here,” Will said, exhaling on a weary sigh. “Mitigating the damage starts now, doesn’t it? Your intentions are transparent, Lord Clarges. How better to begin mending the holes you have poked in my reputation than to be seen indulging me in town?”

Hannibal glanced over at him, amused by the serious scowl on Will’s lovely face. “You are amazingly perceptive at times.”

“Not really,” Will said, eyes flicking up to his. “As I said, your intentions are transparent; a child would know what you’re about.”

“Don’t sound so grateful.”
“I have no reason to be,” Will said, looking away again, swaying with the movement of his mare’s gait. “It is merely an excuse to rub my nose in it at any provocation.”

“Were you less provocative, it might not be a problem,” Hannibal said, urging his horse into a canter. Will’s mare broke into a trot to match, keeping pace.

“You—” Will cut off sharply, scrabbling at the reins as his saddle slid sideways and broke free, tumbling him to the paved road where he landed with a sickening thud that stole his breath. Stunned, he lay there trying to sort out if he’d been hurt or not.

Hannibal reined up short, cursing, and turned his mount around to see Will sitting up in the road, dazed and bewildered. A sudden throb of panic blossomed in his belly at the sight of his spouse there in the lane, wincing with pain in the tangle of his saddle.

“Will!” he drew his horse to a stop before him and hastily dismounted, concerned Will might have been badly hurt in his fall. He was uncertain what had happened to send him toppling from the horse. He was an excellent horseman, Hannibal knew, and was not prone to clumsiness.

“I’m fine, I just got the wind knocked out of me,” Will said, the mare tugging at the rein he still clutched in one tight fist. “She must have blown out her belly. She sometimes does. I should have saddled her myself.”

Hannibal caught his scent, the faint sweetness tinged with acrid pain and traces of something he could not name. “Have you any sharp pains, Will?”

Will shook his head hesitantly, his leg and hip aching where he had fallen. He hadn’t been able to free his foot from his stirrup before he’d hit the ground and lay in a heap with the saddle tangling him up.

Hannibal bent and helped sort him free, frowning because Will was in pain and he could tell, even if the little twit wouldn’t admit it.

“Here,” Hannibal said, focusing on checking his limbs. Will flushed and batted at him with one hand, appalled to have Hannibal’s hands roaming all over him, gently squeezing to feel the bones beneath as he checked for breaks. “Will you stop flailing about? I’m a doctor, Will, if I need remind you.”

“I told you, I’m fine!” Will said, unsure what to make of his concern. “I’m fine!”

Will blushed to the tips of his ears when his assurances made no dent in Hannibal’s examination. Indeed, he seemed so focused on what he was doing that Will just watched him, seeing the man who had tended the wounded in a war far from their own shores. It made him wonder how many had died despite Hannibal’s best efforts, how many lives he felt responsible for in his near-decade overseas. He could see the grim intensity on Hannibal’s handsome face and wondered if he, too, was thinking of those soldiers he had tended and lost.

“It is not the lives you saved that you remember, is it?” Will breathed, and Hannibal’s startled amber eyes met his.

Will immediately dropped his gaze to one side, tamping down his Gift, his father’s warning still fresh all these years later. It seemed to bubble up helplessly in Hannibal’s presence, more troubling to him in the past few days than it had been in six years.

Hannibal’s gaze skated over Will’s stubborn profile but his little mate gave him nothing more than that sharply perceptive observation.

“No,” he said, his professional reserve fading along with the grim memory of those he had failed in the war. “It is those who are lost which I remember most clearly.”

It escaped him how Will would have any knowledge whatsoever about his experiences, nor did it make sense to him how Will could have hit on his thoughts so effortlessly, as if he’d been granted a peek into Hannibal’s mind. It was not the first time Will had surprised him with such an observation, but it was the first time Hannibal felt curious about it. It was not coincidental, he knew. Once was a lucky guess, twice was intriguing enough to make him want to know more.

Yet, Will looked so terribly uneasy he decided against remarking on it. He was, after all, entirely Uncommon and there would no doubt be another opportunity for his sharp insight to make itself known again.

“Nothing is broken,” Hannibal decided, and slid his fingers through Will’s tousled curls, gently searching the fragile dome of his skull, his fingers curving of their own accord around the contours of Will’s little ears. “Did you strike your head?”
“No, we weren’t moving all that fast,” Will said, blushing as Hannibal’s long fingers brushed down his ears, stroked back through his hair once more, and then withdrew, the tingle of his touch remaining behind. He cringed when Hannibal pulled him to his feet, the leg he’d fallen on mightily sore. It was overshadowed, however, by the kernel of sympathy he felt for his haughty and proud husband. War changed people, Will knew, and the battles Hannibal had fought were etched into his memories forever, a wound that would not heal no matter how much time passed.

It was a wound that begged Will’s Omegan nature to soothe it and he struggled to fight down the urge, to fight his bond, to be the Omega Hannibal desired, the Omega his father had molded him to be.

Absent.

“Gods forbid we had been,” Hannibal said, aware of Will’s solemn, thoughtful silence. He dragged the mess of saddle up and flung it to the side of the lane with the same suddenness he dragged Will from his somber thoughts. “You might have broken your neck.”

“Neither of us is so lucky today, Lord Clarges,” Will said, reminded again what Hannibal stood to gain from his loss. Hannibal dropped an uneasy, assessing look at him and pulled his stallion around. The panic he’d felt seeing Will so helpless there in the road had abated somewhat knowing he was not greatly harmed, but it was not gone entirely. Indeed, each time he pictured Will in such a state, it returned with no little insistence. Softly, thoughtfully, he said, “That’s a dismal thing to say, even for so surly a fellow as you.”

Will shrugged, his smile tight and unhappy, turning to discomfort when Hannibal’s hands slid around his waist. Before he could protest, he was hefted up into the stallion’s saddle sideways.

“You’re going to walk to town?” Will asked, scoffing. “I didn’t expect such chivalry from you, especially towards an Omega.”

“Good, because I’m not being chivalrous,” Hannibal said, taking the mare’s reins and tying her to the stallion’s saddle. He briefly crowded Will, grabbing hold of the pommel near his thigh and looming into his space as he mounted up behind him. “I’m not walking anywhere.”

Will huffed with indignant irritation when he was hefted, tugged, and settled comfortably before him, legs slung to one side over Hannibal’s thigh, his wide eyes staring with outrage at the hand that rested on his own thigh to steady him. Hannibal clucked and the horse rolled into an easy walk, jostling Will enough that he reflexively put his arm around Hannibal’s side to grip the back of the saddle.

“This is entirely uncalled for,” Will said, wishing he wasn’t so warm and Hannibal’s Alpha scent wasn’t so deliciously compelling. It made him feel overheated and lethargic, a curious malady, indeed. He tried his best to sit erect but it was nearly impossible and he wound up leaning into Hannibal’s chest, grumpy and sore. It galled him how even this affected him, rendering him nothing more than a touch-starved Omega, the very victim of instinct Hannibal was so repulsed by.

“You’re more sensible than most, Will.”

“Most Omegas, you mean?” Will asked, bristling.

“Most people. You realize there are very few options at hand just now,” Hannibal said, sputtering a little when the wind tickled his nose with a handful of Will’s silky curls. Grinning, he asked, “Unless your head is full of the same fluff that tops it?”

“Ah, finally.”

Hannibal’s brows rose, wondering at his soft chuckle.

“Insult to injury,” Will said, tipping his head forward, taking those soft curls and sweet fragrance with him.

“But you aren’t injured, remember?” Hannibal said, unable to resist needling him. He was surprisingly heavier than he looked, solid and firm with young muscle that sat tensely in Hannibal’s lap. “Goodness, you are very warm.”

“I run hot, and stop squeezing me,” Will warned him, tossing a dangerous glare up at him.

Hannibal hadn’t realized his hand had slipped from Will’s leg to fold around his narrow waist. Feeling a little caught out, he said, “We can’t have you falling again, can we?”

“I didn’t fall!” Will snapped, angry. “I put great store in my riding, thank you very much. I no more fell from her back than you did!”

“You do have an enviable seat, to be sure. You could handle a much more powerful mount,” he mused. “She’s a fine little mare, but she’s a bit drab.”
“I am not interested in how she looks,” Will said, affronted his horse would be so insulted. “She has a soft mouth and a gentle gait and she is very sturdy! I take her on rounds and she never fusses, which is something you cannot say of your stallion!”

Hannibal chuckled, impressed by his passionate defense of his mare, and conceded the point. “No, he’s a handful. We hardly got any bit of business done for minding him. But you are a Marquess, Will. You should have a horse which suits you.”

“She suits me perfectly well,” Will said, casting an affectionate glance back at her and smiling softly when her ears flicked. “She has been stalwart these past six years. She has never shied, even that morning when you—”

He cut off, flushing to have so thoughtlessly brought up the morning he had bonded to his husband.

Hannibal’s amusement fled at the mention of that ride and how things had gone. He had not realized Will had formed such an attachment to his mare, but it made a certain poetic sense to him. When Will had been rejected and terrorized, she had carried him safely home without trouble and had continued to do so since that day.

“I’m of a mind to have all your gear checked,” Hannibal said, gruffly not acknowledging Will’s slip when he was so obviously distressed by it. “You might have sustained a terrible injury, Will. Even such a capable and loyal animal couldn’t manage to unbuckle her own straps. There must be something wrong with the saddle.”

“Yes,” Will said, uneasy, the sudden spike in his tension making Hannibal’s frown deepen.

“I’ll get you something for the pain at the druggist’s.”

“Please, don’t do that,” Will said, refusing, forced harder into Hannibal’s chest as they hit the slight hill preceding Hartford Town. “It is nothing.”

“I won’t have you limping around Bedelia’s garden party,” Hannibal said. “Else they’ll wonder what other carpets I’ve been tumbling you on.”

Will didn’t justify that with a response other than to blush in mortification, doing his best to ignore the way his heart knocked in his chest, surely loud enough Hannibal could hear it.

“You’re coiled like a spring,” Hannibal complained, shifting Will slightly closer, enjoying the press of his warm, solid body enough that he needed to analyze it for a bit and figure it out. He was not prone to attraction to men, whatever their delicacy, so it couldn’t be that, he knew. Fascination, maybe, with the unpredictable nature of such an intriguing and taciturn young man.

“I cannot breathe!” Will said. Hannibal noted he had breath enough to complain, “I’m capable of holding on!”

“You’d rather fall face first into a dung pile than hold on to me, Will,” Hannibal chuckled, allowing the horse his head. It picked up the pace, ears perked, and trotted down the hill towards town. “I doubt it would improve your disposition.”

“To the contrary,” Will said. “A dung pile is preferable to being squeezed in a press.”

Hannibal eased his grip, chastened by the way Will’s complaint ended on a breathless growl.

They passed the last stretch in silence and Hannibal paused at the end of town, watching the village begin its day.

“Mr. Woodward said you like to watch the town wake up,” Hannibal mused, idly spreading his fingers over Will’s thigh. “Is this what you do?”

“Yes, I find it very calming,” Will said, momentarily lost in his own comfortable habits. “There’s something very relaxing about seeing the village rise. And it’s nice to take some exercise after being in the office for those first few hours.”

Hannibal considered that, thinking of his own mornings spent waking next to someone, enjoying the indulgence of servants waiting on them hand and foot while Will was here alone, watching the busy activity of a town he did not feel a part of, separated by a rank he never claimed.

An outsider looking in, making a place for himself through earnest work Hannibal had never dreamed an Omega could manage, let alone as successfully and impressively as Will had.

Will’s fingers moved against his back, a light pressure which distracted him from his thoughts. Nudging the horse on down the main road, Hannibal broke his contemplative silence by asking, “You truly do enjoy your work at Hartford House, Will?”

“Yes,” Will said. “It’s important to be useful and do something worthwhile with one’s time. It is consuming and rewarding work.”
“Will... I do appreciate what you've managed here at Hartford House,” Hannibal said, earning a startled, furtive look from his spouse. “You've managed to make improvements I never expected or would have thought of. I may not have made myself clear on that count towards you, Will, but I am impressed by what you’ve accomplished.”

Will absorbed that, unexpected as it was, but he could feel no lie through his bond to Hannibal and he felt a blush stain his cheeks, the familiar impatience with praise rising in him thanks to his father's lessons.

“I did not intend for you to see me as uprooting your place here, Will,” Hannibal said, turning his horse towards the town livery. “The truth of the matter is, a child will require the full of our attention and I know you would not wish the estate business to fall behind in the meantime. The best solution is to hire an estate manager fairly soon so you can instruct them on how things should be properly done. There is nothing to prevent you from taking over again once our son is old enough for school.”

Will stayed silent. The rational, business part of him understood Hannibal’s position, but he couldn’t help feeling stripped of his purpose. Being the Hartford estate manager was all he knew; he had never been educated about children. His father had never dreamed it would be an issue and had taught him to be useful, with good reason.

‘Useless things,’ his father had said, ‘are only fit for burning.’

“You there, boy,” Hannibal called, getting the attention of a grubby little stable hand as they rode up. “A half mile up the road is a broken saddle. Fetch it and have your master fix it. And tend this mare for now.”

“Yes, m’Lord,” the boy said, darting to take her when Hannibal untied the reins. His shrewd little eyes flicked over Will and, at a loss, he said, “Morning, Mr. Graham.”

“Good morning, John,” Will said, wearily aware Hannibal was determined to be seen with him. Not that it mattered anymore, if he was to hire an estate manager anyway. That aside, after their visit to Gold Meadow Farm and their other tenant farmers, news of his place had, no doubt, already made the rounds of Hartford Town.

“Wondered where you was this morning.”

“Greatly inconvenienced,” Will said with no little heat. “Please see that my saddle is fixed and my horse is ready for my return trip.”

“We can ride double if she isn’t,” Hannibal said, smirking when Will promptly said, “I am sure the weather will be nice enough for me to enjoy the walk, Lord Clarges.”

Chuckling, Hannibal turned the horse back towards the main road and drew to a halt at the dressers, where he swiftly slid down and fixed the horse to a nearby post within reach of a water trough.

“Ah, such a shame,” Will said, relieved. “They aren’t open.”

“They will be,” Hannibal said, seeing movement behind the glass. He reached up and caught Will by his slender waist to heft him down, asking, “Does it hurt much?”

“No, I’m fine,” Will said. “And I tire of telling you so. Let’s finish whatever mischief you’re up to and be gone, shall we?”

The mischief, much to Will’s exasperation, was engaging Mr. Avery, the tailor, to flesh out his meager wardrobe and Hannibal took great pleasure in the way the staff all fawned over him, eager to please.

It made Will snort with disdain from his seat, his untouched tea beside him and his arms folded over his chest, his opinions unasked after Hannibal declared him tetchy and viperish and entirely out of sorts.

“I will expect you to send off to your sister store in the Capital for the quality I require,” Hannibal said, rubbing his chin as he looked from one waistcoat to another, trying to decide which would suit Will best as his mate had gruffly claimed to have no interest in any of it. The pale green with soft shell patterning would make his eyes seem all the lighter, but he was rather more partial to the rich blue, which he knew would both compliment Will’s coloring and make his eyes deeper in color.

“This is ridiculously difficult,” he said, frowning between the two. “What do you think?”

“The midnight blue is quite lovely,” Mr. Avery commented, glancing at Will. “But Mint is all the rage this year.”

“The midnight blue, then,” Hannibal said, gesturing Will to stand. “I will not have any member of the Lecter family being trite.”

“Perish the thought,” Will breathed, reluctantly standing to be fitted for quick adjustments while Hannibal set about choosing his jacket and ordering a new pair of boots for him. “Honestly, Mr. Avery, is this entirely necessary? I have not changed all that much since last spring, surely?”
“Last spring?” Hannibal echoed, pausing in his perusal to fix Will with an incredulous look, sparing Mr. Avery an answer.

“I required a new riding coat,” Will said, a touch defensive from his tone. “Nothing more. Mr. Avery, however, is very thorough and takes measurements in their entirety, no matter one’s haste.”

“As well he should!” Hannibal said, bringing a flush of pleasure to Mr. Avery’s wan cheeks. “And he will be seeing a great deal more of you, you can be sure! This appalling lack of wardrobe simply will not do! We must visit the Row in the Capital before the Season starts and see you properly outfitted.”

“You are so generous, Lord Clarges!” he was told by the tailor’s assistant, and nodded graciously, pleased they had noticed. “Your son is so very lucky to have a father like you!”

Will’s eyes rounded and he swallowed his laughter, almost undone by the horrified, bewildered expression on Hannibal’s handsome face.

“Are you new here?” Hannibal asked, cocking his head.

“Yes, m’Lord, only just in from—”

“This is Will Graham,” Hannibal said, pointing at Will.

“Yes, Mr. Graham.”

“My spouse!” Hannibal clarified.

“Oh...” the tailor’s assistant went pasty pale and trembled while Mr. Avery merely stifled a smirk, knowing well enough who he was and having been paid handsomely to keep his silence on the subject these many years.

“Good gods, man, how on earth would I have a child his age when I am not even forty?” Hannibal asked, thoroughly annoyed. “Why does everyone think he is something he is not?”

“You do,” Will said, earning himself a startled look which immediately fell into a dark scowl.

“He... he looks so young,” the assistant said, a meek and diffident offering.

“And I so old?” Hannibal inquired, a dangerous glint in his eye.

“Of course not, Hannibal, don’t be petty,” Will said, deciding to stop things before the poor man fainted dead away from embarrassment. He reached out without thinking, giving Hannibal’s forearm a squeeze. “Considering this is the first time anyone in the village has seen you in six years, you can hardly complain that some did not know you were married to me.”

Hannibal gave the assistant a dark look, but the hand on his forearm distracted him from his anger, even brief as the touch was. Without thinking, he corrected, “Am married.”

When he looked down at where Will’s slender fingers lay on his arm, Will immediately dropped his hand and stepped away, embarrassed by his impulsive reaction.

Flustered, Hannibal reluctantly returned his attention to ordering things Will neither wanted nor needed, forgetting it was all for the sake of public opinion when he imagined how pleasant it would be to see his spouse in something other than funeral black.

To Will, it was an impressive waste of time, honestly, and he felt the first hour pass into a second with keen anxiety, wanting only to return to his little office and have some peace and quiet. Once word got around Lord Clarges was in the dresser’s buying the place up for his spouse, the little shop got an unusual amount of activity until it became quite crowded and Will did his best to remain unobserved in his seat. Those in town who knew him by sight knew him only as Mr. Grand, the estate manager. Even those who knew him well enough to pass conversation with him had no idea he was the spouse Hannibal had abandoned Hartford House to escape.

Hannibal, however, made quite a show of charming the townsfolk, many of whom had never really made his acquaintance. The population had swelled significantly since Hannibal had left for the military and the newcomers had only heard stories about their Duke’s heir, only knew what they read about in the Society column of the Capital newspapers.

Will watched him, envying the effortless way he spoke even to strangers, a teasing amusement that left them feeling flattered and singled out. He could be very charming when it suited him, though Will had never chanced to feel Hannibal’s charm turned on him with much effect.

“M’Lord?”

He turned to find a goodly portion of the female customers crowding the store were watching him, equal parts shy and excited.
“I do apologize, m’Lord, for not recognizing you before,” he was told by Mrs. Kirkland, whose husband leased their most profitable grain fields. “I was sure my husband were having me on when he said you was a proper Marquess!”

Will laughed softly, relieved she and her bevy of plump farm wives seemed more pleased than aghast at his duplicity. “Mrs. Kirkland, I assure you my own father would hardly recognize me as a Marquess. I’m afraid I was intent on deceiving you. I humbly beg your forgiveness.”

They tittered and exchanged glances like a group of school girls, which coaxed a smile from him. “You’ve always done right by us!” he was told. “We do hope things won’t change much now he’s come back.”

“Only in that I will no longer serve as estate manager, Mrs. Pembroke,” Will said, and hastily added, “For a time, at least. There are family matters which need tending.”

“I’ve had my fill of them family matters, I own,” Mrs. Kirkland confided, blushing at her own boldness. “But I reckon it will be no chore, handsome as your Marquess is!”

“I will admit my husband’s faults cannot be found in his looks, ladies,” Will said, smiling at the assembled group. “He certainly will make some lucky woman very happy someday.”

There was a round of scandalized, amused gasps and laughter, good-natured and inclusive, as if finding out Will was Omegan granted him not only a place with their husbands’ businesses, but also a place in their feminine circle. It was surprisingly pleasant to feel such camaraderie, even if their sense of propriety caused them to excuse themselves from too much socializing. Despite everything, Will was a Marquess thanks to his husband’s status, and everyone knew that set him apart. He contented himself with simply staying out of the attention Hannibal drew and amused himself watching how Hannibal controlled the room like a delighted puppet-master.

“Mr. Graham! I will have the breeches, waistcoat, and jacket all delivered before the end of the day,” Mr. Avery said, awash now in good spirits at the sudden bustle of business in his little shop.

“Have them given to Jimmy, as usual,” Will said, standing gingerly, glad when his weight did not overly bother his leg. “He will tend to it.”

That earned him a trilling little laugh and the tailor immediately turned his attention back to Hannibal, who kept casting meaningful looks his direction to beckon him closer.

Will, however, had nearly had his fill of the crowded store, and headed towards Hannibal to tell him so when the door clanged noisily and the buxom, dark-eyed Widow Reynolds breezed in, scanning the room to find Hannibal.

“Lord Clarges!” she called, pushing through the polite press to reach him, her eyes alight with excitement and her formidable bosom heaving beneath her rather garishly-colored red dress. “It’s been too long!”

Will came to an abrupt halt at the sight of her snagging Hannibal by the arm and cozying up to him, rendered mute with shock at her gall and embarrassment at her lack of discretion.

“Beatrix Danvers?” Hannibal asked, placing her face at last. He tried to shake her off but she clung like a damned barnacle, much to his consternation. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“It’s Reynolds, now. I heard you’d come home,” she said, fluttering her lashes at him in a way she no doubt thought was becoming. “I came as soon as I could to offer you my condolences.”

“Condolences?” Hannibal echoed, frowning down at the samples he was attempting to choose from and wishing Will would come join him. “And who has died?”

She uttered a shrill little laugh and squeezed his arm, breathing, “You know.”

Hannibal glanced at her, ready to tell her that he bloody well did not know, but he spied Will staring at him and got distracted by the strange, assessing look on his face. It was concerning enough that he began to step towards him but Beatrix held fast, whispering to him, “Your marriage, Lord Clarges! I know you are away from your mistress for some time here at Hartford House and I have come to remind you that I am a widow for many years and very much available to offer you comfort when you need it.”

“How odd,” Hannibal remarked, tipping his face close to her ear to keep his words private. “As I find myself more discomfited now than I was before your arrival.”

He smirked, pleased, and looked up to see Will’s blue eyes on the pair of them, half-lidded and glittering, his full mouth tight with disapproval. It made Hannibal aware that everyone in the dresser’s was staring at him with varying shades of frank
disapproval, for all the world seeing him standing with an old lover on his arm and trading whispered banter with her right in front of his silent, still spouse.

He could almost see the gossip starting, destroying everything he’d hoped to accomplish. Annoyed, he removed Beatrix from his arm and shortly ordered, “Will, please join me, I am in need of your opinion.”

Very calmly, his voice never rising above a soft, sultry purr, Will said, “My opinion is that red is a color which suits you immensely, Lord Clarges. You wear it with the ease of long familiarity. If you will excuse me, I am much too busy to indulge your whims at the moment.”

Hannibal gaped at him, as did the rest of the shop, including Beatrix.

With that shocking statement made, Hannibal’s Uncommon mate turned on his heel and marched out of the shop with the same stiff-backed dignity of a soldier off to war, leaving Hannibal staring after him.

“Goodness gracious, Lord Clarges, is that your spouse?” Beatrix asked, an overdue flush of embarrassment lighting her cheeks.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, watching Will leave the shop with a soft, admiring smile on his face. “He absolutely is.”

Chapter 11

Quietly fuming, Will stalked out onto the street into the cool late morning air. He took a settling breath, then another, annoyed when he recalled the pitying, knowing looks directed at him when that woman had engaged his husband, as if he had any interest at all in whom Hannibal bedded.

But it was too much to be borne, no matter that he was expected to be complacent and mindless on the subject of Hannibal’s affairs. Entirely finished with such an extravagant waste of his time, Will decided to walk down to the livery to check on the state of his saddle, determined to head back to Hartford House.

John spied him coming and ran up to him, eyes bright with curiosity.

“And my saddle?” Will asked, absently rubbing his aching hip, still absorbed in his thoughts. Of all the debacles that could have taken place, of course it had to center around Hannibal’s blatant infidelities, the sheer number of which had reached Will, even sequestered as he was. It was no stretch of the imagination that he would, being bereft of his most recent favorite, locate an obliging body here in Hartford Town.

He urged himself not to care, to consider it for the best because at least now Hannibal would not be demanding his rightful access to Will’s bed, no matter his bizarre reversal on the subject of a child.

It was no use, however, and the longer he thought about it, the more offended and put out he became. It wasn’t enough for Hannibal to shame him from afar. He had to make it locally known he had so little respect for Will, that he considered Will so utterly insignificant, that such flagrant dalliances could be conducted in his presence.

Whatever respect the people of Hartford Town may have harbored for Will would certainly not survive long after today.

“Dunno if it’s enjoyin’ itself, but Matthew’s fixin’ it,” John said, kicking a stone down the paved walk, his high voice dragging Will out of his dark thoughts. “He said it was a strange thing.”

“Yes, I imagine so,” Will said, giving him a few pennies as he was wont to do, feeling churlish for wishing him away but not wanting company just now.

“He your husband? That fancy fellow you come in with?” John asked, bursting with curiosity, skipping alongside Will, who nodded here and there at various people going about their business, trying to pretend as if nothing had changed.

“The paperwork would lead me to believe so,” Will answered him, sour.

“He nice to you?”

“We don’t know one another well enough to be nice,” Will told him. “We are polite, as you are polite with strangers.”

“Hm. He staying?”

“Unfortunately, it would seem he is,” Will said, sighing heavily. “Run along, now, John, and give those pennies to your mother.”
“All of them?”

He looked so woeful that Will handed him a larger coin and said, “Go buy treats with this—enough for everyone, mind you—then take it all to your mother.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Graham!”

Will watched him dash off, envying his energy, and turned back to continue limping towards the livery, hoping to reach home before his irritation overcame him.

It took Hannibal longer than he liked to settle with the tailor, confirm his order, and extract himself from Beatrix, who refused to take his hints or even his outright rebuffal. The gathering of town gentlefolk who’d come to introduce themselves and better themselves through acquaintance had gotten a show, he knew, and no single part of it would help Will’s besmirched reputation.

If anything, Will was worse off now in public opinion than he had been, and Hannibal was vastly annoyed as he was not a man who took failure easily or gracefully.

Especially when it was his own fault.

It was a full half an hour almost before he found himself outside of the shop once more with nary a spouse in sight and by then he was fuming as much at his own culpability in things as at Beatrix’s behavior. At least she, ignorant opportunist that she was, had a good reason to cause a scene! Gossip would cast her in the imaginary role of his lover, which would garner her deference in Hartford Town. He, on the other hand, should have known better than to entertain her attention for more time than it took to politely disengage. That he hadn’t, that he’d given the entire town a spectacle when they clearly favored Will, just irritated him all the more.

‘Red is a color which suits you immensely...’

Will’s flaying, parting comment—so quickly conjured and so delightfully astonishing—had left Hannibal undeniably and thoroughly impressed with him, no matter how shocked the rest of the shop had been. He did feel it had not been entirely called for since he had never had any carnal relations with the Widow Reynolds and had no intentions of seeing her again if he could help it, but he was not surprised Will had deliberately upended that particular apple-cart. The remark stung some when he thought of how easily he’d been imagining Will in the new clothing he’d ordered for him. It was the first time he’d actually not been actively attempting to get under Will’s skin, but still managed to embroil himself in his mate’s stern disapproval. Not to mention how oddly ashamed he felt to be called, in essence, a scarlet woman by his mate when he’d come here with such good intentions.

“Honestly, it’s almost worse if I attempt to please him!” he breathed, looking up and down the street for his wayward spouse.

It didn’t take much to work out where Will would have gone—for his saddle, his mare, and his way home.

Hannibal untethered his horse and mounted, heading towards the livery at a light canter, wondering what on earth it was going to take to get Will into a receptive frame of mind and rescue both their reputations in their community.

Will waited in the stall with his mare until Matthew could talk with him, spending his time in the relative peace of the horses and allowing his irritation to burn itself out. His mare munched quietly on oats, a treat Will was generous with, and the soft blow of her breath and small sounds of her eating relaxed him enough that he leaned his head on her shoulder.

“Mr. Graham?” Matthew said to get his attention, and waited for Will to come to him, his green eyes strangely hooded.

“The saddle is repaired, sir.”

“Mr. Graham?” Matthew said to get his attention, and waited for Will to come to him, his green eyes strangely hooded. “The saddle is repaired, sir.”

“Mr. Brown,” Will said, smiling at the Alpha who had always been so thoughtful of him. “Was there some terrible difficulty with my saddle? I have never had such a thing happen before.”

Matthew’s voice was strained with upset when he lowly told him, “Mr. Graham, that girth strap had no weak points, not even where it buckled.” He pulled the strap from his work apron and held it out for Will’s inspection, showing him where the break had occurred. “It looks like it’s been—"
“Cut,” Will breathed, paling at the implications.

“Mr. Graham, I know I’m no one to advise you,” Matthew said, worried. “But you should tell His Grace—”

“No, that’s not necessary,” Will said, shaking his head. “And I would prefer you keep this information to yourself.”

“But, Mr. Graham—”

“Matthew, I appreciate your concern,” Will said, resisting the frightened tremble threatening to emerge. “But I have no intentions of remaining here for much longer.”

Matthew’s worry faded to uneasy understanding, and his voice was soft when he said, “John told me about you riding in... and Patton was in the pub last night.”

Will took a deep breath and said, “I did not purposefully deceive you. I have, in all honesty, truly been the land agent for Hartford House. The fact that Lord Clarges was required by contract to wed me is so inconsequential as to be dismissed.”

“But he’s back now. For an heir at last?”

“He is,” Will said. Reluctantly, he said, “I’m sorry, Matthew, I’ve been passing myself off as a beta m—”

“Mr. Graham, I’ve always known you’re Omegan,” Matthew interrupted, unperturbed on that count. “But you had everyone else fooled... at least until Patton got a few in him.”

“Yes, apparently word travels fast. Now everyone knows my place here is not what they first believed, that I am not what they first believed,” Will whispered, embarrassed to be so exposed, “and there is no way now to explain myself.”

Matthew frowned, his green eyes flicking to the street outlet for signs of intrusion. “If you’re his spouse, Mr. Graham, then your saddle being rigged makes a lot more sense.”

Will’s stomach clenched. Barely able to force words past the constriction in his throat, he asked, “What on earth do you mean?”

“I mean he’s got a history, Mr. Graham,” Matthew said, “and you wouldn’t be the first one to get in his way and be buried for it.”

Will’s shocked silence went on for so long that Matthew whispered, “You need to tell someone you trust. In case the worst happens.”

Will paled, increasingly queasy to think of who stood to gain the most from his death, who Matthew was so quietly telling him might have been responsible for creating an accident that could have resulted in a broken neck with no one the wiser.

Hannibal.

The same man who had once threatened to arrange just such an accident six years ago, and Will had no reason to think he had changed his mind. Freed of his marriage and his obligation to their respective grandfathers’ contract, Hannibal would have no reason to stay absent from the largest estate of his inheritance and could claim his place without impediment.

It was little wonder he’d returned so willing to do his “duty”.

Thoroughly unnerved, Will wet his lower lip and breathed, “How much do I owe you, Matthew?”

“He may charge it to Hartford House,” Hannibal said, striding into the stable from the end that lay open to the lane.

Matthew tensed in a way was sensed more than seen but still made Will’s nerves tighten nonetheless.

He swallowed hard to see his husband coming towards them, tall and powerfully-built and capable of unknown violence. The heat of Hannibal’s temper was like the rasp of a file on his skin and he flinched, bristling in response, unwilling to allow it to affect him.

“You, there, please have someone saddle Will’s mare for him—”

“No, Matthew, I am capable of saddling her myself,” Will said, responding to his order with tight anger.

Hannibal pinned him with a look and said, “Matthew will have someone saddle her for you. His trade is just this; I am sure he can manage to saddle her correctly.”

Will subsided, not willing to risk a row in front of witnesses over something so trifling, though he doubted very much it could do further damage.

Irritated to be ordered about by another Alpha, Matthew vanished to fetch Will’s repaired saddle, leaving the two of them somewhat alone.

Hannibal reached for Will, cocking his head when he pulled out of reach on a twitch of instinct.
“Will Graham, what on earth has gotten into you?” Hannibal asked, reaching again and grasping his elbow with warm fingers to propel him back outside. “You should not have left the shop in such a fashion.”

“I have no sense of fashion, as you have pointed out,” Will said, deliberately missing the point. “Nor have I any desire to watch you engage services of such a select type!”

“The only services I engaged were those of Mr. Avery and his insufferable assistant!” Hannibal said, his own temper rising to meet Will’s. “Whatever feats of imagination your impressive mind has managed, Will, I was not pandering for a mistress! That would be bad form, even for me, to do such a thing with you present.”

“With me present?” Will echoed, horrified into laughter. “You are entirely unbelievable, Lord Clarges!”

“As are you! I have just spent a small fortune on clothing you,” Hannibal said, turning him to stare down into his face. “Your gratitude is more than lacking!”

“I did not ask you to,” Will reminded him. “And why should I be grateful for that theater you attempted to put on? My presence was not required, Lord Clarges. You could just have easily gone without me and achieved the same aim without making a public fool of me once again!”

“My aim was to see you properly outfitted for the Garden Party,” Hannibal said. “My aim was to bolster your reputation in this village by publicly accepting you!”

Will’s eyes widened with offense. “But instead you destroy what little was left of my lauded reputation by accepting the attentions of a widow with notorious appetites! You had no thought for me at all, Lord Clarges! Perhaps you should bolster your own reputation, sir! After all, you are the one who will have to live with them!”

For a surprising moment Hannibal thought Will had found out about the agreement he’d made with Grandfather and he gaped at him, wondering how on earth he had managed to do so.

“Or have you changed your mind about bringing your family to Hartford House?” Will asked, sensing he was at a loss and wondering at the cause.

Hannibal got hold of himself and said, “You are not going anywhere, Will. You will stay here at Hartford House and bear the child my grandfather has asked for.”

“Lord Clarges, your humor has crossed a line,” Will said, pulling out of his grip. “While it may seem a good joke to you, I assure you that I am not amused.”

“You are not amused because I am not joking,” Hannibal said, the stern tone of his voice making Will look up sharply at him. Taking a deep breath, Hannibal said, “Will, I am deadly serious when I say there will be a child between us.”

“That would require my consent,” Will said after a surprised silence.

He was entirely unprepared when Hannibal said, “Not necessarily.”

Will flinched, knowing Hannibal referred to his heats. There were ways to prevent them, he knew, ways used by Omegas who fought in the military and could not afford to be found out. They sacrificed their fertility in the same way they sacrificed their lives, but Will had found himself possessed of a tiny thread of hope that had kept him from using such methods. He never dreamed he would bear a child for Hannibal, but perhaps for someone, someday, after the dissolution of their farce of a marriage.

“That is disgraceful, even for you,” Will whispered, looking away so that Hannibal was left staring at the line of his jaw and his fine profile. “I doubt even a heat fever could blind you to an undesirable and repellent Omega.”

Hannibal exhaled softly, recalling what he had said last night in the library.

“I should not have said such things to you,” he admitted, uncomfortably aware he was in the wrong. “And despite what you may feel you know of me, I should hope you know I would not stoop to taking advantage of you in such a terrible and unforgivable way.”

Will’s skeptical, raised eyebrow spoke volumes about what he imagined Hannibal was capable of, prompting his husband to say with unusual sincerity, “I am trying to gain your favor, Will. You do like gifts, do you not?”

“That was not a gift,” Will told him, crossing his arms over his chest. “That was a public mockery.”

“I have complimented your fine work at Hartford House,” Hannibal pointed out.

“You have shown great shock that an Omega could muster the intelligence to manage such a thing,” Will said. “It was not a compliment to my accomplishments, Lord Clarges, but a rebuke against my gender.”
Hannibål frowned, brows pulling down as he reassessed.

“The Omegas I have known are all simple creatures with simple pleasures,” he said, completely upended. “Why are you so difficult to please?”

Will laughed scornfully and shook his head. “It is very easy to please me, Lord Clarges.”

“Tell me, then,” Hannibål said, relieved. “And I will do it.”

Will’s blue eyes met his for a heartbeat, just long enough for him to say, “Have our marriage dissolved and let me forget you.”

It was a strained and silent return ride to Hartford House made with a telling gap between their horses, both in contemplative silence, though for vastly different reasons. The moment he handed his mare off to waiting staff, Will retreated to his suite and settled nervously at his small writing desk. Goaded by Matthew Brown’s strained warning, Will dipped his quill, wiped at the slight sheen of sweat on his brow with his free hand, and wrote.

My Dearest Sister,

I am writing to confide in you that a matter of some concern has occurred. As you may have read in the papers, my husband has only just returned to Hartford House and I find I have reason to believe I am no longer safe. This very morning while riding there was an accident with my saddle—an accident I have no doubt would have been fatal had I been riding at any great speed at all. Upon inspection it was found that the saddle had been tampered with, the girth strap sliced to pull free under pressure.

I believe that my life may be in danger and I wished for you, my twin, the only one whom I can trust, to know my suspicions. No one else knows of this occurrence and I would prefer to keep it that way. I trust you will keep this to yourself for now.

Please do not trouble yourself with a reply, dearest Mina. I merely write against a fate I fear I cannot escape.

Ever your loving twin,

Will

He sealed it quickly and prepared it for the post, swiping at his forehead yet again. There was no sign of his husband as he made his way downstairs to deliver the letter into Jimmy’s hands, knowing its existence would be held in strictest confidence.

That accomplished, he headed towards the stable and spied Peter still rubbing down Hannibål’s stallion, murmuring gently to the large horse, who was behaving rather better than it usually did.

“Peter,” he softly called, and smiled in response at the way the gentle beta man’s face lit up.

“Mr. Graham!” he called, delighted. “I-it’s good to see you!”

“It’s good to see you, too, Peter,” Will said, coming closer to lay his hand on the stallion’s nose, unspoken permission for Peter to continue his task if he wished. “Peter, I... I have a question. About my saddle.”

“You got the strap redone,” Peter said, a slight frown flitting across his face. “I-I saw it, Mr. Graham. I saw it was new. Matthew, he did a good job.”

“Peter, did you see anyone near my saddle before I rode out? Anyone who should not be here?”

Peter shook his head faintly, then with more force. “No, Mr. Graham. No one comes here.”

“Someone meddled with my saddle, Peter,” Will confided, lowering his voice to a bare whisper. “I tell you this in strict confidence, trusting you will tell no one. The girth strap was cut—”

“Mr. Graham, I-I check them, I swear—” Peter stammered, furiously shaking his head.

“No, I trust you did, Peter, you always do excellent work,” Will said, hastening to assure him, relieved when it calmed his fear. “No, Peter, it was cut high up, no place you would think to check for weakness. Can you think of anyone who might have had access to do such a thing?”

Peter shook his head again, saying softly, “No, Mr. Graham. The t-tack room is locked.”

“Does anyone have access to your keys?” Will pressed, anxiety bubbling up within him. He tugged at his neckerchief, uncomfortably warm.
“My keys are where they always are, Mr. Graham,” Peter said, his forlorn glance at Will conveying his worry. “On the nail next to my desk.”

Will subsided, realizing that anyone who knew which saddle belonged to him would know well enough where Peter kept his keys.

“Thank you, Peter, you’ve been very helpful,” Will murmured, doing his best to tamp down his nerves. “I appreciate your assistance.”

“Thank you, Mr. Graham,” Peter said, diffident and endearingly earnest when he added, “If I remember something, I—I will tell you.”

“Thank you, Peter,” Will said again, summoning a smile that quickly faded as he made his way back up to the House.

It was something of a talent of his, Hannibal found, Will avoiding him like a plague. He barely saw more than a dark curl or the gleam of a blue eye the rest of the week since that morning in Hartford Town. Will even took meals in his room, when he ever ate at all. Hannibal knew well he could walk down to the estate manager's office and find him there, hard at work against Grandfather's wishes, but he could not bring himself to intrude on the one place Will seemed genuinely at home.

After what he’d said, Hannibal was reluctant to force his company on Will at all.

‘Have our marriage dissolved and let me forget you...’

It was troubling, to say the least. It weighed on Hannibal for days after they'd ridden home in stiff and hostile silence. He simply could not fathom that his spouse would ask so bluntly to be released from their marriage. It was entirely outside of his experience, limited though it was, for an Omega to turn their nose up at a gift and ask to be parted from great fortune rather than thrown headfirst into it.

“You're brooding, boy, when you should be courting your spouse,” Grandfather said, finding Hannibal in the library. When Hannibal looked up at him, he chuckled softly and asked, “Have you been dancing around Will again?”

“I cannot find him even for that, Grandfather. He is confoundingly Uncommon,” Hannibal said, recalling the sadness in Will’s large blue eyes. “He's avoided me as if I’m a leper ever since I took him to the village. I bought a fortune in clothing for him, you know, and I’ve seen neither hide nor hair of him since. If I spent even half so much on one of my mistresses, they’d have been delighted for days! Yet he has made me feel in the wrong for it.”

“You are wrong for it, if you did it for the reasons I imagine you did,” Grandfather said, wheeling over to the shelves and beginning to put the stack of books in his lap back in place, which would no doubt send the House librarian into palpitations when he realized it and was probably Grandfather’s intention. “Will has never been interested in things, Hannibal. He isn’t one of your easily-sated women in the Capital and he isn’t cheap. He would much rather spend a day fishing from his dock than being plied with gifts. The way to his good graces is much more complicated and rewarding than the sum of your women together.”

“Is there something very wrong with him? Is he ill, you think?” Hannibal asked, frowning at the fire as it had the sheer audacity to be rather merry and comforting just now.

Grandfather snorted, cradling a book in both hands. “There is nothing wrong with him and Will is never ill, Hannibal.”

“He was ill the evening before I left,” Hannibal reminded him, clearly recalling how Will had been absent from the table that evening, taken with some malady that Hannibal had figured for childish retribution.

And how nervously determined he’d been after, coming into Hannibal’s room in his nightclothes. Young, frightened, and trembling with resolve.

His stomach clenched with shame thinking of what he’d done to him then.

Roland’s brows lowered and he said, “Yes, he was upset a good few weeks after you abandoned him, but not ill a day since. He makes it a point not to be a burden on anyone here. It was all I could do to convince him to keep Mr. Price.”

“Prince? You mean his valet, Jimmy?” Hannibal asked, not overly familiar with the man who had been hired during his absence at war. “Yes, well, he has certainly not been burdensome. I had imagined all sorts of horrors awaited me here, especially when I learned of old Mr. Verger being dismissed.”
“Will has thrown himself into running this estate,” Grandfather remarked, putting away the last book and sighing. “He cares for it like he might a child.”

“Don’t start,” Hannibal warned, glowering at him. “How am I to get a child out of that prickly Omega when we cannot share a room, let alone a bed?”

“You could try speaking to him as an equal and making friends with him,” Roland suggested. “Will is very receptive to kindness, Hannibal, and it may lead to other things in the long run.”

“He would brain me with a vase if I look sideways at him, the violent little thing,” Hannibal cursed, annoyed.

“Goodness, how you do go on,” Grandfather chuckled, amused. “Shame on you, Hannibal, saying such things about Will when he is the very picture of gentility and calm!”

Hannibal angled a dark look at his grandfather and got nothing more than a slight, satisfied smile in return.

He sighed heavily, considering things from his spouse’s perspective and how he would feel in his place.

“As Will himself so keenly pointed out, it is rather offensive to show up after six years and demand access to his bed after the way I have treated him. Any Omega worth their salt would want some wooing after that, I suppose.”

“If Will requires wooing it is not because he is maneuvering for your attention, Hannibal,” Roland said. “It is because your expectation of him is his absence and that is all he knows. Just as you require persuasion to believe that Omegas are not all like your father’s concubine, which is counter to your expectation.”

“Please don’t mention that monster to me,” Hannibal said, his glower becoming a scowl and his mood instantly plummeting.

“She was an Omega,” Grandfather said, bewildering Hannibal until he said, “Mischa, your sister. She was an Omega.”

“Hannibal,” Roland said, his sad resignation reaching his grandson when reason could not. His voice was gentle, cautious, but firm when he whispered, “She was an Omega.”

Hannibal stared at him, struggling to make that truth align with his memories of the child he’d been so deeply loving of. His darling baby sister, precious and dear to him even if she had been borne of that frightful abomination.

“Mischa—” He paused and cleared his throat, buying himself time, his thoughts churning in a mire of memories he had not given acknowledgment to in far too long. “I find it hard to believe that, Grandfather.”

“It’s rather hard to mistake them when they’re still in nappies, Hannibal,” Roland said, careful with him. “There are Omegas all around you and you never realize it, not even with that keen nose of yours, and I have my suspicions as to why that is. You spent ten years away at war thinking you were in company bereft of Omegas but I can tell you with certainty that you have treated a great many who would have died on the battlefield for their country the same as the Alphas and betas who did so.”

“That is a ridiculous notion,” Hannibal breathed, unwilling to consider it and finding a safe retreat from the information he simply wasn’t prepared to deal with yet. “There are many valid and sound reasons why they are not allowed to enlist, one of them being that an Omega would immediately be betrayed by its scent and heats.”

“Not with suppressants and scent blockers,” Grandfather said. “Science is a remarkable thing, Hannibal. Omegas have always been taught how to mask themselves when needed. You have wandered a world in which those whom you have met stand only to gain by playing to your perceptions, to the stereotypes your experience has cultivated. It has, unfortunately, only made you even more certain you are right in your assumptions when in fact you have seen the whole of their gender through a very narrowly-defined lens reflecting back what you expect to see.”

Hannibal restlessly tapped his fingers on the mantle, his mind whirling with too much clarity, too much new information, reluctant to think his grandfather could be right in this.

“You are intelligent, fair, and committed to being just,” Roland reminded him. “I know you can take a second look at what has plagued you since childhood and see it for what it truly is—a cobbled-together prejudice based on anger instead of fact.”

Grandfather gave him a fond smile and wheeled his chair silently out of the room, leaving Hannibal alone before the fireplace, riddled with uncomfortable thoughts.

Mischa, his little sister, born when he was young enough that he didn’t clearly remember the world before her, and gone so long from him that it was difficult to remember his life with her in it. She was a blur of color and sound, a memory of sweetly-
scented hair and abandoned, gleeful laughter, the sum of everything good he had ever felt in his father’s house for the few short
years before tragedy had taken her from him.

His Mischa, his little Queen, the apple of her mother’s eye, the light of his world.

A light snuffed out too soon and for such pointless reasons, whose first gurgling coo had captured his heart in a way not
even death could remove.

He imagined his judgments applying to her, his darling little sister, and it made him cringe. It was almost too much to
believe as the truth, but he knew Grandfather would never tell such an outright, ghastly lie, and it left him troubled, trying to
reconcile the fact that Mischa was Omegan, just like her wretched mother.

“My Lord,” Berger called to him from the doorway, startling him out of his thoughts. “I’ve your things all prepared, if
you’ve still a mind to go.”

“Yes, Berger, thank you.”

Confused, thoughtful, and wanting a soothing soak, Hannibal headed upstairs, still trying to wrap his mind around the
things he’d just been told. He was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he barged into the bathroom still stripping off his
clothes and drew up short, his brain scrambling at the sight of Will making a hasty exit from the tub at his intrusion, a flurry of
white limbs and wild blue eyes in a billow of steam.

“What on earth—”

Will snatched his sheet around him, almost falling in his haste to escape the bath he’d only just entered.

“Do you never knock when you enter a room?” Will flared, struggling to cover himself from throat to ankles and failing
miserably, his shapely calves and long feet exposed below the hem of his sheet. He was so much more slender than his clothing
gave the illusion of him being, supple muscle under dewy skin with a high, round bottom and just the barest peek of a slightly
round hip flashing from the folds of his damp bathing sheet.

It was profoundly disconcerting, such delicacy topped with damp dark curls and ill-concealed panic spiced with no little
anger, a hint of true fear, and some tantalizing something elusively teasing at him. Hannibal caught his breath at the sight, his
mouth going dry.

He recovered enough to become terribly aware he himself was barely better than naked, something Will had taken clear
note of if the way his blue eyes fixed on the ceiling was any indication.

Feeling graceless and silly for having walked in on him, Hannibal stiffly said, “This is my washroom.”

“Not for the past six years,” Will snapped, angered enough that those big eyes of his actually met and held Hannibal’s
own.

Hannibal felt a shocking and utterly unexpected curl of attraction bloom under the heat of Will’s gaze, confronted as he
was with the after-image of Will’s lithe and supple body and the promise of his formidable temper. He had never in his life met
someone as entirely unexpected as Will Graham, and he was intrigued by his own growing interest in the feisty, easily-irritated,
and rather surly Omega who was his spouse.

Glowering, showing altogether too much of his pearly white hide and the dark mottling of a bruise down one delightfully-
muscled thigh from his fall, Will drew his sheet around him with all the affronted grace of a snubbed goddess and hissed,
“Enjoy it while the water is hot.”

Hannibal stared at the bounce of his perky backside peeking from below the lip of his sheet as he strode away, shocked
into silence when Will had the audacity to enter his suite and close the door behind him before Hannibal had finished properly
almost formulating an apology to him.

“Bloody hell!” he shouted, damned if he would both offend Will then chase him from his bath in less than an minute’s
time. He was not, by the gods, a monster.

Hannibal crossed the washroom in three quick strides and jerked the door to Will’s suite open, surprising him all over
again. Standing imperiously in the doorway, he pointed back at the bathtub and stiffly said, “Get back in that tub immediately!”

Will’s chin went up, blue eyes sparkling, hands clenching into fists on his sheet, which was doing a poor job of hiding his
body at this point, enough to be more than moderately distracting now that a large pink areola was partially exposed, a delicate
blush color that complimented Will’s pale skin.
“No,” Will said, the word short and clipped. “As you so graciously pointed out, it’s your washroom, and of the two of us, Lord Clarges, you need it more.”

“You cheeky little twit,” Hannibal swore, pointing more vigorously, incensed to be disobeyed when he was actually conceding to his unconventional spouse. The sheer gall of his mate was absolutely staggering! “Back, or I will put you back.”

Will’s eyes widened dangerously and Hannibal braced himself, alert to any potential weapons in the room. He very much doubted Will could lift the hassock near his bed but he wasn’t about to risk being cossed into unconsciousness by his meek and retiring mate. His pride would never survive it.

He wasn’t entirely sure he would survive Will Graham.

“Go back to your suite,” Will said, and when Hannibal began to retort, he loudly added, “Then I will get back into the tub.”

Fuming, Hannibal dropped his arm and took a deep breath, reminding himself that he was a calm and rational man of even temper and lauded reserve. He certainly was not a man strongly fighting the urge to turn his unclaimed mate over his knee and paddle the sass out of him. Certainly not!

“Do as you please, you confounding creature!” he said, turning on his heel to slam back the way he’d come, banging the door to the washroom closed behind him only to be immediately confronted by his valet stammering apologies.

“You spouse is in the washroom, my Lord—”

“I am aware,” Hannibal snapped, irritably going for a brandy. He poured an unmeasured amount and flopped into a chair.

“He usually isn’t long,” Berger said, heading for his dressing room with Hannibal’s freshly-polished boots. “I’ll get your clothing ready, m’Lord.”

“Leave it, I’ll do it myself,” Hannibal murmured. When he wasn’t instantly obeyed, he slit his eyes open to glare at the man still hovering before him and was rewarded with compliance at last.

Once Berger was gone and he was alone, Hannibal closed his eyes again and took a sour swallow of his brandy, the soft sounds of water moving in the next room pricking at his nerves. His traitorous mind unhelpfully conjured images of Will slipping out the bath like a supple little water nymph, startled and fey and delicate as a roe deer flushed from hiding.

The thought of his mate’s undeniably lovely form made him think about the child he’d promised his grandfather, which led his thoughts on to Will’s heats. He was certainly grown enough to be having regular heats by now, though no one would discuss something so appallingly private with anyone other than a lover. He wondered what means Will had settled on to deal with them, unmated and unbound as he was. He probably sent every Alpha in the vicinity into rut when it happened. It was a wonder no one had been hurt.

It left him scowling at his empty brandy glass as if it somehow betrayed him, thinking that if he hadn’t been so blasted dead-set on rejecting Will, he might even now be the one Will turned to during such a time.

‘Let me forget you...’

Will’s blue eyes stared at him from his memories, the fire of the washroom replaced with the sick despair of understanding that last day six years ago when Hannibal had spoken so harshly to him, had rejected him and everything he had so innocently offered.

‘Alpha...’ Will had whimpered then, appealing to a good nature Hannibal had been in no mood to indulge. He’d been little better than a child and Hannibal had treated him like a worldly courtesan. Worse, he’d accused Will of deliberately wielding his charms like a weapon and had ruthlessly cut him down in a savage attempt to disarm him.

The water sloshed again, a faint pattering of drips that brought the image of Will stepping from the tub, water running down his limbs in silvery trails, dripping from his skin to meet the surface of the water.

Feeling absurdly envious of the bathtub was not something gentlemen of good breeding should succumb to. Frustrated, Hannibal flung the brandy glass down and finished undressing, doing his best not to think of Will naked in the washroom just a short distance away. The knowledge that he was shockingly desirable was just another fact to be mused over and considered.

It seemed he was destined for a wearying day of revelations, and Hannibal knew it was only just beginning.
The ride to Fernhill was longer by coach than by horseback, Will realized, watching the terrain roll past as Roland spoke to Hannibal of Anthony’s prospective fiancee. As Will had been told of Anthony’s intended in confidence, he excluded himself from the conversation and neither man took notice of it, though Hannibal was unusually somber and preoccupied in his responses. It made Will wonder if something had gotten into his husband, he was so strangely not his routine, overbearing self. He’d certainly behaved oddly after crashing in on Will’s bath this afternoon, demanding he finish as if personally offended by the idea of Will conceding his place.

Very strange, indeed, considering his usual behavior.

Determined not to think of unpleasant things for the day, Will nervously straightened his jacket, appreciating its fine cloth and color despite himself. Quality was a pleasure he partook of so little that he was helpless against it and was surprised Hannibal had not baited him on the subject by now, no doubt having seen him surreptitiously fingering the hem of his waistcoat where it peeked from beneath the front of his unbuttoned jacket.

The grand namesake of Fernhill itself came into view around the bend, a massive and sprawling structure Will had only glimpsed from the uppermost turrets of Hartford House. It had seemed so distant there on the horizon, a tiny speck of stone set against the blue sky. Now, traveling past its foundations, it seemed a monster on par with Hartford House itself, aged and noble and secure in its sheltering of generations of Dimmonds.

“What on earth are you gaping at?” Hannibal asked, sounding more himself. “I can’t imagine Anthony hasn’t had you over when the family is out, yet you act as if you’ve never been here before!”

“I haven’t,” Will said, shrugging, tipping his head to see more of it.

Hannibal leaned over him, an easy thing to manage as Will was slender and a bit shorter than he, and looked with him.

“Damn that cousin of mine anyway, never inviting you over,” he muttered, trying to see Fernhill through Will’s eyes and finding it very grand indeed. The press of Will’s slender back against his chest distracted him as much as the tickling fluff of his sweetly-scented curls. He recalled how he’d looked fleeing his bath this afternoon, pink and pale and lovely in all, and his pulse pick up.

Entirely uncalled for...

Very nearly.

Clearing his throat and pushing the thought away, Hannibal asked, “It’s impressive, isn’t it?”

“Though not so impressive as Hartford House,” Will said, his cheeks pinking at the pressure of Hannibal’s body against his back and shoulders, the man’s warm breath stirring his curls. “Is it just as lovely within?”

“Even more so,” Grandfather said, the pleased expression on his lined face causing both of them to nervously retreat in opposite directions. “I’ll have Anthony give you a tour.”

“Please, do,” Will said, delighted at the prospect.

“How your face lights up at the mention of that bounder,” Hannibal observed, smirking when Will’s cheeks reddened further. “I’m surprised he didn’t marry you for himself.”

“According to you, he did. Such unfortunate luck for us both that the law says he didn’t, as he finds me pleasing enough,” Will said, feeling as if a complaint lay lodged in Hannibal’s words, as there so often was. “I think I should have been happy as Anthony’s spouse.”

The wistful lilt to his voice made Hannibal feel uncomfortably guilty and irritated. Guilty for how he had behaved that Will would wish for such a thing, and irritated he had maneuvered himself so quickly out of Will’s regard so many years ago. He had no one to blame but himself, but that did little to aid him. *Regret* would not, he knew, pull a teacup together, no matter how one might wish otherwise.

Once, he’d deemed his actions justifiable. Now, comparing the poised young Omega at his side to the youth he’d walked away from, he questioned his own decisions, and what he found did not settle him nor give him peace of mind.

“Will, there is no cause for that type of thing.” Grandfather scolded, glowering at both of them. “You are married to Hannibal and that is that.”
“Yes, that is that,” Hannibal echoed, watching Will drop his head in contrition. “We will have to make the best of things as they are.”

The coach pulled to a halt and footmen rushed to get the doors, gesturing them out onto the expanse of the back garden where the sun cast a merry glow on all sorts of revelers.

Will stared, anxiety pinching his features as he looked out over the vast acres of green lawn and carefully-tended flower beds, lanes of trees and copses leading onto thicker wood all framing an enormous lake. He was used to the sprawling embrace of the Hartford estate but this was the first time he’d seen so much land covered by so many people.

“Hannibal! I wasn’t sure you’d come,” Bedelia said, drifting over their way as the footmen got Roland settled into his chair. She looked fresh and comfortable in the cool air, the colors of her day gown light and complimenting her pale coloring. She held out her hand to Will and stroked his cheek, smiling when his eyes dilated.

“Is there something on his face?” Hannibal asked, bristling. “You spend an inordinate amount of time fondling him.”

Will sighed, already tired, and stepped away from the slight comfort of Bedelia’s gentle touch.

“Just because you have no idea how a civilized Alpha communicates with an Omega, Hannibal, does not mean I am at fault,” she said, the slow cadence of her voice never rising above a soft purr. “I am happy to instruct you, should you ever decide to forsake your barbaric ways.”

“You—”

“Bedelia, light of my life!” Roland said, wheeling rudely past Hannibal to greet his granddaughter. “Let’s be pleasant, shall we? Show me to those children! I insist on holding all the new little ones!”

Bedelia gave Hannibal a lingering, amused look and settled her hand on Roland’s shoulder, saying, “Of course, Grandfather. Oh, and Will? Anthony has been waiting impatiently for you to arrive. Do go put him at ease with your presence?”

Will drew a deep breath as she moved off with Grandfather, fussing with the tail of his coat, nervous of his appearance.

“Will?” Hannibal said, busy tugging at his own cuffs, preening when Will glanced at him. “You’re very pale. Is something the matter?”

Will didn’t respond; he looked out at the groups of neighbors and Society members with trepidation before saying, “I have never seen so many people in one place before.”

Hannibal frowned and followed his line of sight, ignoring the other newcomers who milled around them to find their respective ways into the garden.

“I had thought it a rather smallish party, actually, compared to most,” he said, considering it. “Parties I’ve thrown at Galley Field make this one seem quaint.”

“I’m sure,” Will said, casting another look around. “Yet to me this seems a veritable ocean of humanity, Hannibal. I am not used to it.”

“No, I don’t imagine you are,” Hannibal said, mouth pursing with concern. “It is very good luck we have time before the Season starts to acclimatize you to such gatherings.”

“I am sure you will be far too busy attending parties in the Capital and filling Grandfather’s Parliament seat to throw very many parties all the way out here,” Will remarked.

“Quite right, but considering you will be with me at those very same parties,” Hannibal said, amused by the light scowl that crossed his little mate’s face, “we should strive to numb you to them while we have a chance to do so. Ah! There is Anthony!”

Will looked around to where Grandfather had drawn a large gathering of family to him, all delighted to see him out at long last.

“Will,” Hannibal said, catching him by his elbow and guiding him towards the gathered group. “Please don’t forget the purpose of attending today.”

“How could I?” Will asked, gracing him with a dour glare. “You wish to show the world how you have returned as a hero, graciously excusing me my existence and nobly looking past my deficiencies to do as your grandfather bids you. What a long-suffering martyr you are, Saint Hannibal.”

“Well thank all the gods you’re in good form today,” Hannibal said, chuckling at his venom. “I should hate to suffer through this provincial horror without your surly peevishness. No one would ever believe me a saint otherwise.”
“Don’t worry yourself on that count, Lord Clarges,” Will said, wishing the mere presence of this man didn’t give him such conflicting signals of safety and danger. “Your reputation precedes you, however—sainthood will be difficult to obtain.”

“You’ve remarked on my reputation more than once, Will, but I have no idea how on earth you’d have heard very much,” Hannibal said, amused by the way Will glowered up at him. “Stuck out here in the country for six years like a monk in a monastery. I doubt anyone could carry much gossip that far.”

“They can and do,” Will said, relieved to hit the shade of towering old trees which kept the worst of the sun off. “The servants chatter among themselves and I hear it, in part.”

“Why on earth are you mingling with the servants?” Hannibal asked, bewildered. “Honestly, first passing yourself off to the county as an estate manager and now hobnobbing with servants! Your upbringing has been particularly peculiar!”

“Yes, you could say so,” Will said, relaxing enough to start looking at those around him, admiring the many lovely colors of dresses and fashionable jackets that abounded.

“Did your father not instruct you?” Hannibal asked, curious. “I imagine he must miss you very much. Has he been banned from the premises as well?”

“My father is a busy man and has no reason to see me,” Will said, his throat constricting painfully with his words. “His instruction was vigorous and weighty and I bear the fruit of it all these years later. His wisdom in raising me has served me well, I can never say otherwise.”

“And your sisters, have none of them contacted you?”

“Not so much as a card,” Will admitted, blushing when a woman caught his eye and winked at him for staring overly long at the pattern on her dress. “They are grown women with households to run and families to rear, all happily paired with men who suit them. It would be rude to press on their happiness.”

Hannibal wrinkled his nose. “A very strange family, it seems. My family certainly has no qualms pressing upon my happiness. I am sure I have met one or another of your sisters over the years. They should have asked after you.”

“Lord Clarges, they would never,” Will said, laughing at his indignant huff. “Speak to a man of standing of his detested spouse—their own brother—while in public? He may have bewailed his rearing of me, Lord Clarges, but my father raised his daughters to be better than that! Heavens, they’d have died of apoplexy if you’d even breathed my name to them. I’m very glad you never recognized them. I shouldn’t want that on my conscience, thank you.”

“I would assume once word gets ‘round about our reconciliation, they will be clamoring at the doors?” Hannibal said, smirking.

“Only at your invitation,” Will said, and looked down at his feet as they walked, his eyes tracing the pattern of pebbles beneath his boots and the fine silt of dust gathering on the polished leather. “And I would not call this reconciliation, Hannibal. I am not entirely certain how to interpret your intentions considering what I know of your opinions.”

“Do they require interpreting? I have told you, Will, I desire that child from you for my grandfather’s sake, and you must surely have given thought to a little one now and then,” Hannibal said, distracted by the idea of Will with a baby. “As we are both adults with functioning senses, we should be able to manage without undue fuss and nonsense.”

They drew near enough that Anthony caught sight of them and he strode their way with a happy grin, proudly escorting a lovely young woman on his arm.

“Anth—Lord du Maurier!” Will said, vastly relieved to see him with his intended. Anthony had told him of her, a feisty and humorous Omega who suited him entirely. He shot a sharp look at Hannibal, willing him not to be rude, and gave her an honest smile she returned with open friendliness.

“Hannibal, you made it!” Anthony said, unable to resist needling him just a little with, “Has anyone been coshed yet?”

“Give it time,” Will said, ignoring Hannibal’s sour look.

“Anthony, you’re being rude to your friend,” Hannibal said, and took her hand to grace it with a soft kiss, saying, “Young lady, you are a vision of loveliness. Allow me to advise you not to continue on with this dandy as you are far too fetching to settle for the likes of him.”

Will blushed, uncomfortable with his effusiveness but not surprised. Even Hannibal could get over his dislike of Omegas for the sake of spiting Anthony.
“Lord Clarges, you are too kind,” she said, her perfectly modulated and sweet tones speaking of someone with musical inclination. “Anthony warned me you might be dangerous. He clearly fears your charm.”

“As well he should, as he has none for himself,” Hannibal said, finding the scent of her skin quite strangely absent. Most beta women used some type of perfume, and usually the ones courting Alphas used scents designed to attract attention, not subvert it.

“Don’t encourage him, Fredricka. He has far too good an opinion of himself as it stands,” Anthony said, and extracted her hand from Hannibal’s grip to hold it in his own, saying to Will, “May I introduce Miss Fredricka Lounds?”

“Will Graham,” he said, unused to anything else, and he kissed her hand as he knew he should. “Anthony has told me so much about you.”

“You are the very image of your sister,” she said, delighted with him and, no doubt, knowing he was an Omega the same as she. “It is truly uncanny.”

“So I am told,” Will said, dropping her hand as well as his gaze.

“Do you not find them strikingly similar, Lord Clarges?” she asked, amazed.

“I have never set eyes on Will’s sister, nor any one of his kin,” Hannibal said, wondering at Will’s strange behavior with her. “And, as you know, this one right here married him for me, so I have never had the pleasure of meeting Will’s family.”

“No, Lord Clarges?” she asked, amusement shining in her light blue eyes. “I was not given to understand you have been terribly busy these past six years.”

“Yes, well, it has lovely meeting you,” Hannibal said, summoning a smile. “Would you care to join Grandfather, Will?”

“Not so fast,” Anthony said, grasping Will by his elbow and guiding Fredricka into place. “You’re my cousin and no one has let slip yet but I wanted to tell Will first—it’s been decided. Freddie and I are going to be married!”

“Oh! Anthony, that’s wonderful!” Will said, delighted for them both. “Congratulations to both of you! I’m sure you’ll be perfectly happy together! The family must be very excited!”

“Yes, they are,” Anthony said, grinning from ear to ear. “Or, rather, they will be once Hannibal’s opinion is settled on the matter.”

“Why should my opinion carry a feather’s worth of weight?” Hannibal asked, unspeakably relieved by Will’s obvious delight for their union. “I am sure your parents would not allow you to choose a young woman who was unsuitable for you.”

“Not that exactly,” Anthony said, exchanging a long glance with Fredricka, who tipped her head in silent agreement and laced her hand through Hannibal’s elbow, saying, “Walk me around the lake, Lord Clarges, so we can get to know one another better.”

“I would be delighted,” Hannibal said, eager to be seen as accommodating by those present and perhaps show his more chivalrous side to his reserved spouse.

Will watched them stroll off together and looked at Anthony, who seemed fairly satisfied and amused.

“He hasn’t realized,” Will said, swallowing nervously, anxious on her behalf. “Anthony...”

“Don’t worry so much,” he urged, draping his arm over Will’s shoulder to draw him into a stroll some ways behind them.

“ Freddie can handle my cousin, Will, and it’s all the more amusing he can’t figure out she’s Omegan. That keen nose of his is so blind in such oddly specific ways. It truly is uncanny.”

“I’m not sure if his nose is blind or if her products are stronger than mine,” Will said, lamenting the efficacy of his own regimen. “He still manages to catch my scent.”

“Well,” Anthony said, and gave Will a soft, lopsided smile when he added, “You have bonded, Will, haven’t you, even if he doesn’t know it?”

Will sighed heavily, frowning at the idea of it. “It only goes one way, Anthony. I doubt that could be it. Perhaps it’s just his keen nose, after all.”

“Well he does seem to be more interested,” Anthony said, smiling and nodding at those they passed on their way. “Or at least more attentive. I guess he was serious after all about reclaiming his place.”

“Yes,” Will said, his thoughts returning to his saddle and what Matthew had said. Taking advantage of the moment, he asked, “Anthony, what would Hannibal do to keep his place as heir?”
Anthony’s brows rose and curiosity filled his eyes. “I would have had a different answer for you a week ago, Will. Now? I can honestly say I’m not sure.”

“Accept an Omega, perhaps?” Will suggested. “Would he go so far as to do violence?”

“Violence?” Anthony echoed, immediately more attentive. “Will, why would you ask me that?”

Will swallowed hard, reminded in an instant that, for all their differences, Anthony and Hannibal were cousins. When it came down to it, blood would always pool together, and it was dangerous to ask Hannibal’s family such questions.

Unnerved, Will wet his lips and told him, “Please forgive me, Anthony. I spoke without thinking.”

“He was a soldier, Will,” Anthony said, his uncertainty about Will’s purpose making his words cautious and careful. “He left the war behind, but he will always be a soldier. Violence is a part of him, now, but if there is something specific you have heard, gossip, perhaps—”

“No, Anthony,” Will said, controlling his nerves with difficulty, knowing Anthony knew something was amiss. “Please... things have been very stressful for me recently. I have no idea why I asked such a thing. Think nothing of it.”

Anthony stared at him for a long, assessing moment, but gamely nodded in honor of Will’s wishes.

Will remained silent at his side, grateful he hadn’t betrayed his fears to the man who had always been his friend. A man who would feel compelled to defend Hannibal, or perhaps warn him of Will’s suspicions.

“Whatever you may hear of Hannibal today, Will,” Anthony said, his fond gaze on his intended where she strolled arm in arm with Hannibal. “Please take it with a grain of salt. There is nothing people love more than to tear down something they think is above them.”

Will smiled, tight and unhappy smile that it was, and tried his hardest to put the saddle and its implications to the back of his mind.

“Anthony often speaks about you,” Fredricka said, floating at Hannibal’s side with the grace and weightlessness of dandelion fluff on the wind. She was rather smaller than Will, and had an abundance of riotous red curls that refused to be tamed into submission. “Always in terms of Will Graham, though.”

“Ah, yes. Will,” Hannibal said, annoyed to be reminded of his cousin’s close relationship with his spouse. “We, however, have not had the pleasure of hearing about you in turn.”

“Not surprising,” she said, laughing softly. “He was nervous for your approval. He does set an enormous store in your good opinion. Not to mention he has, until very recently, always imagined he would eventually marry Will.”

Hannibal stiffened, irritated to hear it put in so many words.

“And that doesn’t bother you? The fact that he wanted to marry my mate?”

“No,” she said, a merry twinkle in her blue eyes at his choice in words. “Will is perfectly lovely, all the more so for not believing himself to be anything such. There is a melancholy in him that seems to lure Alphas, especially ones as good at heart as Anthony. In truth, Lord Clarges, knowing Anthony would choose me when Will Graham might still be his only tells me how much Anthony truly loves me.”

“In that you are mistaken, Miss Lounds,” Hannibal said, frowning at her summation. “There was never a possibility Anthony would marry Will. I would never stand for it.”

“You certainly gave everyone a vastly different impression,” she said, her blue eyes full of mischief when she looked up at him to gauge his response.

“I cannot control what assumptions people make from my prior actions, but I assure you, I am back to take my place and ensure Will takes his own,” Hannibal said, smiling to think of Will getting his proper due. “Relationships are not always what they seem. You will understand once you are wed.”

“On that subject, I must be sure you approve,” she said, turning quite serious. “Anthony is adamant, as am I.”

“I have no grounds to disapprove,” Hannibal told her, wondering at their persistence. “You are moneyed, I assume, young enough to bear him heirs, deep enough in his esteem that he is caught in public with you, intelligent enough to recognize his faults and wise enough to understand they are few.”

“Am I?” she asked, smiling. “Intelligent, that is?”
“You are not holding his relationship with Will against him, knowing it is nothing like he may have once wished,” Hannibal said. “You do not feel threatened by my spouse but you do admire him.”

“Even though he is Omega?” she innocently inquired, and Hannibal had the good grace to flush, winning a mischievous smile out of her. “Lord Clarges, you might want to tug your waistcoat down a bit, your prejudice is showing.”

Hannibal scowled at her. “My opinions are based on facts, young lady. Facts speak for themselves.”

“Do they? And what do your facts tell you of Omegas?” she asked, squeezing his arm to her modest bosom. “I am curious, now.”

“In my experience, omegas are flighty, flirty little butterflies,” Hannibal said, reciting his hard-learned lessons like dogma and doing his best to keep his opinions safe for feminine ears. “They like nothing more than to idle about spending money that is not theirs on things that catch their fleeting attention. They are children, most of them, easily distracted by something sparkling and pretty but prone to throwing fits and acting out if not indulged. I find them tiresome, annoying, mindless baggage...”

He trailed off, his memories of the Omegan courtesans who had plagued his childhood giving way to thoughts of Mischa and Will, a jarring juxtaposition, indeed.

Freddie absorbed his lecture in silence, her red brows drawn together in a slight frown.

“Will is not at all as you described,” she finally said.

“No, he defies explanation,” Hannibal said, focusing on the image of his poker-faced Omega. “He is argumentative, hot-tempered, violent, and altogether Uncommon.”

“Goodness, Tony must not know him half so well as you do,” she said, laughing softly. “Which is passing strange as he has spent a good deal more time with your spouse than you have.”

“Why must I find myself surrounded by provoking creatures?” Hannibal asked, angling an exasperated, amused glance down at her. “Do you fish, madam?”

“Fish?”

“Never mind,” he said, looking away to view the lovely scenery. “I will spare you the explanation. Be warned, however, never to agitate Will or you’ll go the worse for it.”

“I have no intentions of agitating him in the least and can’t imagine why anyone ever would! He is such a friendly and thoughtful young man,” Fredricka said. “It is my hope we can be fast friends. Ah! Cards! Shall we play, Lord Clarges?”

Hannibal looked around to find several tables had been set up beneath a billowing canopy, attracting those seeking shelter from the sun into gaming. A table was emptying as they drew abreast and Hannibal nearly declined for lack of more players, but Fredricka called behind her, “Hurry up, Tony! You’ll partner me, won’t you?”

Anthony, ambling along some distance behind them with Will at his side, hurried his step and came to sweep out a chair for her, settling her with an indulgent, smitten grin.

“Well,” Hannibal said, sparing a glance for Will, whose somber expression did nothing to detract from his undeniable beauty, even if he seemed excessively troubled. “Will you partner me?”

Will took his seat next to Freddie without responding, still far too distracted by his worries and the people around them to feel at ease.

“I do hope, Mr. Graham,” Freddie said, a teasing gleam in her eyes, “that you can overcome your Omegan nature well enough to count?”

It startled Will into a soft huff of laughter and he skated a glance at Hannibal to find him scowling, indignant and offended.

Clearing his throat, Will said, “Yes, Miss Lounds, I do well enough.”

“Well enough?” Hannibal echoed, and snorted. He sat down across from Freddie and began gathering the cards up in his long fingers to shuffle them. “Miss Lounds, do not be deceived by his modesty. Will is deadly sharp with numbers, as the Hartford House accounts can attest. I dare say he will do you in before this game is done.”

Will’s brows rose in his surprise but Hannibal seemed hardly aware of the compliment he’d paid, which made it feel keenly precious to Will, and his cheeks pinkened with a faint blush.

“Despite his being an Omega?” she inquired, her tone playful, and Anthony nudged Will beneath the table, grinning.
“He is Uncommon,” Hannibal reminded her, and his amber gaze landed on Will with weighty assessment. “There are many surprising facets of him I have found so far and, no doubt, several more of which I have not yet become acquainted with.”

“Provided those facets don’t involve you agitating him,” Anthony said, sweeping his cards into a pile as Hannibal dealt. “Then you should be safe enough.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure agitation should be avoided as such,” Hannibal said, smirking. “It can create many an interesting situation for those with the spirit to act on them.”

Will bristled and gathered up his cards, telling Hannibal, “As I have said previously, Lord Clarges, I refuse to become any more intimately acquainted with the carpets of Hartford House than I am just now.”

Anthony laughed and Freddie’s red mouth curved into an appreciative smile, no doubt having heard the entire story from Anthony.

Will put all such thoughts and aggravations out of his head to focus on the game. As Hannibal had predicted, he was dangerously adept at counting and played with aggressive determination Anthony couldn’t quite counter. Freddie, for her part, matched Hannibal play for play but was trumped by Will’s formidable imagination and before long they had attracted a small group of observers.

They won the first round and began a second, all idle conversation set aside for the sharp, rapid slap of cards on the table.

Will justified his praise by taking the trick twice in quick succession and they won by a wide lead, leaving Hannibal grinning and delighted in the reserved, embarrassed young man across from him. Will hesitantly returned the smiles and congratulations of their small crowd, slowly relaxing, Hannibal was pleased to see.

Freddie, utterly charming and looking strangely pleased, excused herself in the changeover to stroll the lake on Anthony’s arm, leaving Hannibal with Will and a growing, admiring crowd.

Hannibal stood, smoothing his jacket as he did so and warmly accepting the compliments given on his game.

“I have to admit, the bulk of the win falls to Will,” he said, moving to Will’s side as he, too, stood to make way for new players. He still seemed uneasy to be in the middle of such a large crowd, though he cut a fine figure. His new wardrobe suited him, a sleek and fitted tailoring that made the most of his athletic physique and subtle curves. Hannibal was pleased to see he’d drawn quite a few admiring gazes, and not entirely for his prowess with numbers.

“... employee! I have no idea why on earth he would be here of all places...”

The whispered speculation reached Hannibal’s keen ears, carrying over the conversation rising around him. He’d been expecting such comments, but he hadn’t expected how angry they would truly make him.

Will heard it as well and tipped his chin up, searching out the scandalized couple eyeing him through the crowd. He straightened his shoulders and stretched a bit taller, unwilling to summon the least bit of regret for his actions at Hartford House.

“I’m afraid that is a misunderstanding, Mrs. Wilkes,” Hannibal said, his voice carrying over to them, bringing immediate, alarmed stillness. He graced them with an easy smile, taking advantage of this opportunity to quash some of the gossip. He settled his hand at the base of Will’s spine and stepped closer to him, aware of Will stiffening in response. “Lord Clarges, as you’ve seen for yourself, has enviable intelligence. He has indeed spent his time at Hartford House running the estate, but always in the capacity of my spouse and in the Lecter name.”

There was consternation from no few, though the rest continued to mill about, anxious to renew their acquaintance with both Hannibal and Will.

Will cautiously tested his bond to Hannibal at that unexpected defense, surprised to find only sincerity and a low, burbling undertone of anger that was not directed at him, but rather for him. He looked up at Hannibal to weigh his expression, but his husband was already converging with other guests, an easy smile on his face as everyone tried to engage them both at once, excited and eager.

Will tried to smile at them in return, but the darkest part of him that spoke in his father’s voice fed him doubt about their sincerity. He was unused to so many people, unused to so much positive attention directed at him. He found it all rather overwhelming, but his tension subsided some with the steadying pressure of Hannibal’s hand against his back. The touch was warm and firm, pressed right to the base of his spine where the slight, exaggerated Omegan curve swept down into his pelvis.
Yet he couldn’t shake the shadow of his father’s voice that whispered of a broken saddle, a cut girth strap, and a fall that could have killed him. Will tried to tamp it down as best he could, knowing he lacked vital information regarding his accident and that dwelling on it was only making him more nervous.

“What do you think, Lord Clarges?”

Will realized the silence had stretched a beat longer than it should have and glanced up to see Hannibal, three gentlemen, and several lovely ladies looking at him expectantly.

“Excuse me, I was wool gathering,” he said, blushing to seem so inattentive. “I’m afraid I didn’t hear you. Please forgive me.”

“My fault entirely, I should be more specific which Clarges I’m speaking to, what with there being two of you now,” Will was told, and everyone chuckled politely as if it had been clever.

“If you’d care to come for a visit at Hartford House, Mr. Katz,” Hannibal smoothly cut in, “we could have more time and more comfortable surroundings for estate talk. We would dearly love to have you and your lovely daughter for dinner.”

“As long as we aren’t the main course.”

Will looked at the young woman before him, surprised by her tart response, a smile curving his mouth at the open amusement on her lovely face.

“Beverly,” her father said, his repressive tone holding a note of pleading that spoke of years’ worth of losing on that particular front.

“Miss Katz, lovely as you are,” Hannibal said, an appreciative grin baring the tips of his sharp teeth, “I value your company far too much to make a meal of you. My spouse sets an elegant table, I am sure you will not be disappointed, especially if he can procure another trout.”

Will felt oddly relieved to find Hannibal gazing down at him with fond amusement. He didn’t resist when Hannibal rubbed his back, but certainly felt warmer than he had. The earthy-rich Alpha scent of Hannibal’s skin seemed to cling to him from his touch, a subtle marking that he was protected. It gave him a feeling of safety at complete odds with the lingering worry over his accident.

“You fish, Lord Clarges?” Mr. Katz inquired, fevered interest lighting his face.

“No you don’t,” Beverly warned, and reached out to take Will’s arm. “Come on, let me save you. I have something of a talent for it.”

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Will said, having no choice but to go with her or else be dragged off.

Hannibal merely watched, a slight smile still on his face to see his little spouse in the hands of the capable and deliriously social Miss Katz. No doubt by the time Hannibal reclaimed him, the entirety of the country would know Will Graham better than he did.

“That child will be the death of me!” Mr. Katz lamented with a smitten smile. “But what can one do? Daughters are a gift our spouses give to us, and she is the very likeness of her dear mother.”

“She is a delightful young lady,” Hannibal said, recalling many times over the past six years when Miss Katz had crossed his path. “And Will needs more companions who are closer to him in age.”

“She knows no stranger, Lord Clarges,” Mr. Katz reminded him. “You may never get him back.”

They laughed together and spoke of upcoming business in Parliament which Hannibal, as a Peer and his grandfather’s proxy, would have direct influence with. They were soon joined by others, conversation drifting along acceptable lines of polite inquiry rather than heated debate.

Hannibal, however, kept an eye on Will, whom Miss Katz had installed into a gaggle of young ladies. He was too distant for Hannibal to see clearly, but he didn’t seem distressed.

“... with Lord Clarges, no less! It is the very same boy, I swear it! Oh, he and Lord du Maurier were certainly having us on, claiming he was married to the Marquess of Clarges!”

The comment reached him from a passing group so intent on looking behind them at Will that they didn’t see Hannibal next to them.

“... asked him to leave without even setting eyes on him! And it turns out he was nothing more than an estate manager, for the gods’ blessings! Can you imagine?! How on earth he hasn’t been fired by now is beyond me!”
Hannibal’s glower deepened as the snippets of their gossip reached him, conversations behind hands, whispered conjecture, all of which boiled down to one glaring summation—Will was too far beneath them to be Hannibal’s mate.

It made him that much more determined to define Will’s place in this world.

The fact that his place collided rather soundly with that of Hannibal’s mistress was not one he could be bothered with at present, not when he was so busy trying to find away across the distance of wrongdoings that separated him from his little mate.

“Excuse me, please,” Hannibal said, stepping away from the gathered group.

“Off to find better company, Lord Clarges?”

It was playful ribbing Hannibal was well used to, and promptly responded to with, “And prettier, as well. Or have you not yet met my spouse?”

He strode away to a roll of delighted laughter and moved down the lakeside towards his mate.

Will, who so often seemed lost in his thoughts or far removed from himself, had been drawn into conversation by Miss Katz’ friendly social circle, though she herself was nowhere to be found. Yet he seemed engaged enough, smiling and chatting. To the flighty, young, and curious ladies who surrounded him, Will Graham was nothing other than a handsome, distracting young beta male with whom they could flirt and befriend. They had no knowledge of who he was and Will, by his ease with them, had made no move to inform them.

Hannibal drew to a stop on the path and leaned against the trunk of a towering tree, watching Will for a time, enjoying the bright sparkle in his eyes and the animation in his face that lit him up like warm sunlight.

It made Hannibal wonder how he would look when he was truly happy.

“Such a fuss everyone is making over that boy.”

Hannibal only spared a small sliver of his attention for the woman who drifted up next to him, a voluptuous beauty greatly testing the seams of her dress with her handsome figure.

“Is he truly your estate manager?” she asked, tipping her head Will’s direction. “Lady Darnell insists he tried to pass himself off as married to you, Lord Clarges, when the papers first published your announcement. I am sure you had no idea he had done such a thing. Are you not terribly shocked he has come here?”

Hannibal angled a tight, polite smile at her, amused by the naked envy in her gaze as she looked at Will. “No, I am not terribly shocked, in truth. He does precisely as he pleases, which is an admirable quality in my eyes.”

“I imagine, a man in your employ attending a function such as this,” she sighed, fluttering her lashes up at him. “We are inundated with such unpolished company these days.”

“I have indeed noted a surprising lack of well-mannered gentlefolk, but I doubt very much my cousin would invite a working class man to her gathering,” Hannibal said, smiling slightly when Will smiled, finding the curve of his generous mouth suited him much better than the tight press of his lips that kept him perpetually frowning.

“I met him in Hartford village on chance some time ago, your Mr. Graham. I find him rather plain and common,” she said, fanning herself. “Don’t you simply despise the plain and common, Lord Clarges?”

“Indeed,” Hannibal answered, his eyes fastened on Will. He was laughing, delighted, blue eyes sparkling with good humor. He had been pressed to sit on a blanket spread on the lawn and his small entourage of young admirers fluttered around him like colorful, chirping birds, tittering with empty-headed amusement at his sharp and surprising humor.

Hannibal pushed away from the tree and straightened his jacket, prompting the young woman to ask, “Are you off, my Lord?”

“Yes,” he said, angling a look down his nose at her. “I am afraid you have the right of it, madam. I do despise both the plain and the common. As such, I am removing myself from their presence to find relief in the company of my lovely spouse. Good day.”

Had he looked back, he would have seen her gaping and furiously embarrassed behind him.

But Hannibal only had eyes for Will.
It was uncanny the change that fell over Will when he spied Hannibal heading his way. His dark brows drew down over his
narrowed blue eyes, his full mouth pressed tight, and a mutinous expression overcame his lovely features, transforming him
from a merry, careless youth into a surly, glowering one.

“Ah! Lord Clarges! Have you come to scold us?”

There was a round of laughter, silly and meaningless.

“No, young lady, I have not,” Hannibal assured her, not for the first time painfully aware of the twelve-year age difference
between himself and Will. His ferocious little Omega was young enough to enjoy a place here among a bevy of youthful
beauties while Hannibal was old enough to be their father, most of them. It was unsettling, to say the least. “I have come to
have a word with Will.”

“Are you friends?” one of the younger ladies asked, her green eyes empty in a way Hannibal detested.

“I would not say we are friends,” Will told her, a wry smile curling one corner of his mouth and his sly blue eyes sliding up
to read Hannibal’s expression, “or that we are even friendly.”

“I would not say we are not,” Hannibal bantered. “Or have you not told your admirers that we are married?”

Will bristled and stood, annoyed, Hannibal was pleased to see. He was also pleased to see the keen disappointment on
their faces at both the news and Will’s absence.

Stiff with offense, Will strode towards the shade of the nearby trees and gave Hannibal his back when he arrived.
“What is so terribly important and world-ending that you must pester me?” Will asked, arms crossed over his chest.

“I merely needed to escape the attentions of a rather dull and unimaginative woman,” Hannibal said, not about to admit
his satisfaction of parting Will from his admirers.

“So you sought out the company of a dull and unimaginative Omega?” Will asked, huffing a short, irritated laugh. “Lord
Clarges, your reason is excessively disturbed.”

“I have a large measure of opinions, Will, but your being dull or unimaginative does not number among them. Trust me,
anyone possessed of wits enough to oust Mr. Verger and use a trout with deadly force certainly does not lack for imagination,”
Hannibal said, taking his elbow to walk him towards the hedge maze. “Where is your savior?”

“I may have offered a convenient excuse for Bev to escape her father’s vigilant doting,” Will admitted, his smile wry.

“Bev?” Hannibal echoed, and chuckled. “If she insists you call her that, Will, you merely provided an opportunity, not an
intention. Miss Katz is well known for her steadfast friendliness. She would not purposefully use you.”

“No, I don’t think she would,” Will said. He smiled then, adding, “She is very personable. I would so enjoy if they did come
to Hartford House, but I am not used to entertaining.”

“You’ve certainly never bored me,” Hannibal teased him, delighted by the way Will’s cheeks reddened. “The air is fresh
and the clouds are out. Walk with me awhile, Will.”

Will did so, amicably for a period of time until the hedges rose up around them. He then pulled his elbow free, unsettled
by the warmth and strength in Hannibal’s touch, and promptly tucked his hands into his jacket pockets.

“There are a great many people still who do not realize we are married,” Hannibal remarked, head tipped down slightly to
see Will’s thoughtful profile. “You sequestered yourself at Hartford House all these years, just as you said. Yet you have your
chance now, Will, to take some satisfaction in their discomfort. Why would you not do just that?”

“I have my own future to think of, Lord Clarges. I still have to carry on once you finish whatever mischief you’re up to at
Hartford House, and being exposed to the world as your spouse will only inconvenience me,” Will said, aware of his attention
and turning his face away. He risked Hannibal’s ire, he knew, but it was far too ingrained in him that his looks were unpleasant
to his Alpha. “You made it very clear when I came to Hartford House that you did not want me. You have spent six years
pretending I do not exist and Society believes your spouse to be dead, either by illness or pining. I am, in essence, a ghost, I
believe. I would prefer to remain that way.”

“I had no idea the extent of the speculation surrounding our marriage as I pay no mind to such drivel,” Hannibal said,
taking a deep breath of the cool air, checking his comfortable, long-legged stride to accommodate Will’s slightly shorter legs.

“Today has been revealing for me. I hear there was an incident in which you attempted to visit with the neighbors?”

Will laughed again, a throaty, raspy sound that played over Hannibal’s senses like velvet-covered fingers. “I attended the
Darnells’ soiree with Anthony at his insistence about a month after you left. I was summarily called an impostor, refused
entrance, and asked to leave as my supposed husband was in the Capital with his mistress and never spoke of having married a man."

Hannibal frowned, mouth pursed, and clasped his hands behind his back, thoughts turning.

"It was... eye-opening," Will said, sighing heavily. "Before very much time had passed it was about that I was simply Anthony's lover and we were playing a joke, as the whole of Society knew Hannibal Lecter had married a proper woman and I was certainly not that. I told you before, Lord Clarges, how I was perceived in the wake of your disapproval."

"So, you hid yourself in Hartford House and put about to my family that I had forbidden them to visit?" Hannibal asked.

Will released another weighty sigh and told him, "I did not want them to know me, Hannibal. As you had not mentioned me, I hoped to mitigate what damage I could and keep them from attempting to mend a situation that did not bear mending."

"They would have had you out into Society in a heartbeat, Will," Hannibal said, shaking his head at the young man's stubborn nature. "A slap in the faces of those who had shamed you."

"Yes, and you would have been exposed as having married someone you considered patently unsuitable and embarrassing," Will said, his words sharp and clipped. "Which is precisely what you did not want, Lord Clarges. And as I did not want to be further ridiculed publicly by your many exploits and inattention, it seemed the best course of action I could take. Little did I realize it would follow you back to Hartford House with such immediacy!"

"I will say it only once more, Will—that woman is not and will not be my lover," Hannibal said, glowering when he thought of the Widow Reynolds and her grasping hands. "I barely knew her in my childhood and wish I hadn't then, either! Honestly, it escapes me why so many people take such an unseemly interest in my personal life."

Will, thinking he meant himself, tightly said, "I do not consider my interest unseemly, Lord Clarges, as it only extends far enough to spare me further damage. Beyond that, I only hope your boredom will send you back to your proper family and away from Hartford House before people begin to believe there is anything of substance between us."

"And who are you trying to spare with that, Will?" Hannibal asked. "Me or yourself?"

"Can it not be both?" Will asked, stopping to give Hannibal a steady, unflinching stare. "You have no reason to stay here, Hannibal, and every reason to leave. If your grandfather comes to his senses and grants us a separation, then I may yet find someone who truly enjoys my company. Our marriage would only be in the way. I stand to gain nothing by being named as your spouse."

"I do," Hannibal said, swinging to face him and meet his moiling eyes. They were sparked with green against the frame of the hedge behind him, flecks of amber peeking up through them. Such changeable, unusual eyes, melancholy lurking beneath growing ire and bewilderment. "Some of them believe I have killed this imaginary woman they assume I've married. Some of them believe she is trapped up in Hartford House. Others believe she is a fiction altogether, as no one has ever heard of or seen Willia M Graham."

"Such drivel," Will softly said, one brow quirking over his eye as he smiled, darkly amused. "What wondrous luck you pay no mind to it."

"Ah, but I have been forced to pay mind to it today," Hannibal said, and took a step towards him, enjoying the slight widening of Will's eyes and the reflexive way he tilted his chin up, as much stubborn defiance as it was baring his covered throat. Hannibal caught the faintest trace of his scent and that strange, strengthening undertone sharpened with his sudden nerves and leaned closer to seek more of it.

"I suggest you ignore it, Lord Clarges," Will said, taking a step backwards and snagging the heel of his boot on the pedestal of the statue behind him. He caught himself and stepped up on it, gaining a precious few inches to bring him level with Hannibal's own height, rebellion shining in his sharp blue gaze. "As there is no easy or satisfying solution otherwise."

Hannibal turned his head in the direction of soft laughter that drifted from behind them, aware that a sizable group was blundering through the maze in their direction. He turned back to Will, who bristled at the scheming he could clearly read on his face, and swiftly slid his hand around Will's waist to press his palm to the base of his slender spine.

Will tipped forward in a clutch for balance, one hand lifting to brace on Hannibal's shoulder, alarmed by how close they were, so close he could feel the heated puff of Hannibal's breath on his mouth and was engulfed in his Alpha scent. It was heady stuff, and Will shivered, the fine hairs on his arms and nape lifting in response, his body betraying him with warmth that flooded color into his lips and cheeks and widened his pupils despite the strong sunlight.
“Hannibal, what are you doing?” he hissed, alarmed by his own responses, pushing away only to have Hannibal’s other arm slide up beneath his, pulling him flush to his chest. “Stop this!”

“It is too late, I think,” Hannibal murmured, smirking and amused, his nose brushing Will’s as the younger man struggled. Will’s soft scent teased his nose, a warmth that slid down his throat with a burn like fine liquor and left him thirsty for more. “As we now have an audience, pray don’t make a fuss.”

Will’s breath came sharp and fast, flooding his lungs with the scent that so affected him. His eyes flicked to the group of young ladies and their beaus who stumbled into the small clearing with them, startled and curious at their position, for all the world a pair of lovers caught stealing a kiss in the privacy of the maze.

“What are you about?” he breathed, confused and furious. His traitorous heart picked up its pace, his bond to Hannibal tugging him like a line to an anchor, overwhelming him with the desire to abandon himself to Hannibal’s careless, thoughtless keeping.

“Behave,” Hannibal warned him, shifting closer. “I am being found besotted by my spouse. It wouldn’t do to ruin the show now, would it?”

Will tightened with anger but summoned a sweet smile for the young people staring openly at them, now, agog at what they were witnessing. It was an act of sheer willpower, but he forced himself to ignore the demands of his bond to this man. He was not an Omega. He was neither a man nor a woman. He was simply himself, and that self refused to give Hannibal the satisfaction of thinking him cowed.

“Well, I suppose if one is to be a bear,” he said, because two could play this game as well as one and if Hannibal was determined to light a fire, they may as well burn together, “one should be a grizzly.”

He cupped Hannibal’s face in his hands and tipped his head, for all the world begging a kiss.

Hannibal leaned in, pulse quickening in surprised anticipation, oddly delighted that Will was so suddenly and completely receptive. He moved close enough that Will lips teased against his own when the young Omega whispered, “That should be close enough to fool them, don’t you think?”

Hannibal froze, keenly disappointed that Will had stopped just short of kissing him, the little minx, and only by virtue of his own deadly pride did he manage to close the distance. It was almost more intimate than a kiss would be, eyes locked together, lashes mingling with every flutter of lids, breath pulsing against lips and hearts pounding. It would almost be a relief to just go ahead and kiss him, to force Will’s angry blue eyes to close, to see him undone just a bit, jostled out of his sadness and quick temper by the touch he surely craved after six years of solitude.

“Excuse us, Lord Clarges,” one of the young gentlemen said, mustering up the bravery to intrude. “We did not mean to interrupt your...”

Hannibal smiled and Will smirked, sharing a moment of amusement at someone else’s expense for a change. Will’s fingers fell to curl against his shoulders, firm and strong. The subtle shift of muscle down Will’s side as he moved was warm and silky against Hannibal’s hand. It was with great reluctance that he tugged Will down from the statue’s pedestal and let him catch his feet, but he did not relinquish his hold as he looked back at their audience.

“Please, excuse me,” he purred, unaware of pulling Will tight against him but enjoying the light pressure of his touch on his chest and side. “I am sometimes rather overcome with affection for my spouse.”

“Your spouse?”

There was such an air of unabashed consternation about them that Will’s shoulders shook with silent laughter, though he kept his head turned away to hide it.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, clearing his throat to keep the amusement from his voice. “Why do you all look so surprised?”

“I... we...” They exchanged glances among themselves, at a complete loss.

“Yes, well, excuse us,” Hannibal said, deftly swinging Will around to settle his arm around his waist, feeling possessive under so many watchful eyes. “We will move along then. Shall we, Will?”

He cut straight through the middle of them, propelling Will along with him and not stopping until they were well clear.

“And just what on earth was that, Lord Clarges?” Will asked, too flustered and amused to be angry.
“I told you what that was,” Hannibal said, still affected by the lingering feel of Will’s warm body against his. He was beginning to reconsider his initial thought that he was not given to attraction to men, because the recollection of his eagerness for that almost-kiss made him tighten with unexpected anticipation.

He glanced down at Will, at the gleam of light brown highlights in his curls picked out by the sun, at the rim of his ear exposed by the wind, at the arch of his thick brows over his sparkling eyes, and knew his attraction to his Omegan spouse depended not at all on the beauty before him, but the ferocious intelligence he wielded like a weapon against the world.

Tearing his gaze away from his delightfully formed, undeniably beautiful, and entirely distracting little mate, Hannibal briskly said, “We have to give the appearance of being satisfied with one another.”

“What an impossible task you’ve set yourself, Lord Clarges,” Will said, sidling away to gain just a bit more distance. “Pretending domesticity with an Omega.”

“Should I rather jump on hot coals and call it a waltz?” Hannibal asked, quirking his brow at Will, who gave him a menacing-sweet smile and said, “If it would not trouble you to do so.”

“Ah, your tongue is excessively sharp, Will,” Hannibal said, delighted.

“I am happily everything of which you disapprove,” Will said, attempting to make his point.

“I did not say I disapprove,” Hannibal said, surprising him. “I merely made an observation on your nature.”

“Shall I make an observation regarding your own?” Will inquired, curious. Their pace slowed somewhat, aided by the cool air blowing beneath the lane of trees casting shade over them.

“That depends,” Hannibal said, amused by the way Will looked at him, forgetting his stiff reserve in favor of his burning curiosity.

“On whether they are nasty observations?” Will asked.

“No,” Hannibal said, determined not to make reference to their unfortunate clash in the library. “It depends on whether your observations involve violence.”

“Give me a moment,” Will said, a reluctant smile curving his full mouth. “I am rather resourceful.”

“Trotting out your finer qualities on my behalf, Will?” Hannibal asked, his own half-smile failing when Will checked, his straight shoulders squaring and familiar blank calm falling over his face.

“I have no need for your approval, Lord Clarges,” Will said, remembering what a precarious situation he was in where Hannibal was concerned. “Only your absence.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you.”

“You have never been sorry before,” Will said, hands clasped behind his back.

*That* got Hannibal’s attention. “Disappointment implies expectation, Will. Did you have expectations of me?”

Will frowned, recalling how hopeful he’d been in his father’s house with Mina whispering how happy he could be. *Happy.* And he had been so foolish and hopeful and stupidly young.

“Once, maybe,” he said, knowing it required an answer or else Hannibal would badger one out of him. “But only for a short time.”

“Until I left you?”

“Until I met you, Lord Clarges,” Will corrected him, tipping his face into the breeze.

Hannibal fell silent, chastened.

The lake spread out before them, but they were mostly alone. Hannibal chanced a look at Will and cleared his throat, venturing, “I never asked you, Will, what you expected to find at Hartford House when you first arrived.”

“It never occurred to me you would be interested,” Will said, gazing out at the lake, forgetting to keep his face turned away.

“I had imagined you a spoiled thing,” Hannibal mused. “Cosseted and indulged, deeply enamored of your own looks and well aware of your own worth, expecting to coil me about your little finger.”

He watched the wind ruffle Will’s curls, exposing the curve of his ear again in a peek of pale skin. He had the oddest impulse to push Will’s hair back to see his ear in full.

“I never gave myself a chance to know you. I never gave you a chance to show me who you really are,” Hannibal said. “I never let you know me in return.”
Will turned those blue eyes on him, weighing his sincerity against a cut girth strap and an accident that could have killed him.

“I know you, Hannibal,” he said, his voice soft and low as he loosened his hold on his perception. “You are the last Alpha male in a direct line stretching back through history to our country’s royal family. Pride and importance are bred into your soul, a fort of blood and bone housing a pedigree few can rival. You are offended to the core of yourself by that which is less than you.”

Hannibal stared down at him, absorbing his words, those vague, brilliantly blue eyes fixed rigidly on his own.

“Unfortunately for the world, we are all less than you,” Will murmured, his lids lowering as he averted his face. “Though perhaps, in the end, it is more unfortunate for yourself, Lord Clarges. It must be very lonely, being one of a kind.”

“I am no more alone than you are, Will,” he said, and impulsively reached out to tuck Will’s hair behind his ear, satisfied to see it was just as lovely as he had imagined. “You are certainly one of a kind.”

Will didn’t pull away from the touch, only murmured, “Then we are alone together, I suppose, but alone nonetheless.”

“We don’t have to be,” Hannibal said, his gaze skipping over the beautiful scenery without really seeing it, his focus entirely on his thoughts.

Will stared at him, feeling once again he was missing something which would explain all of Hannibal’s behavior, something above and beyond—or perhaps akin to—the accident that had occurred.

Hannibal clasped his hands behind his back, thoughtful and silent when Will did not respond. They walked further down to the lakeside and stopped in the shade of an awning put up for the party-goers. There were several large groups about the lake and many small boats launched. Will heard music drifting over the water, a pleasant, lively tune meant to invoke good spirits.

“Will, the contract our grandfathers signed hinged on one outcome,” Hannibal said, “that of an heir.”

Will took a deep breath, steeling himself for unpleasantness.

“Grandfather is insistent, Will,” he went on. “And your place as my spouse depends on you providing that child. Grandfather has been patient with us both, but he will not wait forever. He hasn’t the time.”

“That child?” Will asked, wondering at the change. An heir could only be a Lecter male, preferably an Alpha.

Hannibal cursed softly under his breath at his quick mind and hastily said, “Well, an heir is a child; either way I believe you can grasp the basis of how such a thing must come about.”

“Goodness, be careful with your compliments of my deductive capabilities, Lord Clarges, lest I faint,” Will said, sharp and quick.

Hannibal snorted and wrinkled his nose, “Then we would both be indisposed because I would faint alongside you from pure surprise.”

Will laughed, a short, raspy bark of sound that quickly tapered.

“Honestly, your humor is perverse and you are spiteful,” Hannibal said, unable to repress his own chuckle.

“It must be disturbing for you to find common ground with an Omega,” Will said, looking up at Hannibal, his eyes a lovely, cool blue beneath his black lashes, changing to suit the sky above them.

Hannibal smiled then, admitting, “No, it is not.”

Surprise flashed over Will’s face, a furtive glance laced with heavy skepticism.

“Hannibal,” he said, using his given name to ensure his full attention. “Over six years ago, I offered to give you an heir and you refused me.”

Refused.

Hannibal flinched, the scent memory of that encounter returning with sudden, profound clarity—warm sweetness, desperation, fear, and the salt of Will’s tears.

“You made yourself pointedly clear,” Will said, his voice never rising above a soft purr. “Not just that even the idea of it sickens you, but that there is nothing you want less than a child with me.”

Hannibal frowned, a dark flush rising in his cheeks, his own recollection of that night as crisp and clear as Will’s seemed to be.

“Now here we are, six years later,” Will said, squaring his shoulders. “The offer no longer stands, Lord Clarges.”
Hannibal tipped his head up the slight breeze, hoping it would cool his burning shame.

“I don’t want a child from you,” Will told him, a pointed echo of his own words. “There is nothing I want less, in fact, than something which will bind me to you for the rest of our lives.”

“I suppose I deserved that,” he admitted on a chuckle, darkly amused.

“Yes,” Will said, cutting a look at him from beneath his heavy lashes. “You did, and there is plenty more where that came from.”

“Well, I am glad to see you are not suffering overmuch from the gossips, my darling.”

Will’s eyes widened to painful proportions as he turned to find behind him none other than his dear twin sister.

Chapter 13

For a disorienting moment, Hannibal saw two Wills—one in a gentleman’s proper gear, the other in a beautiful, expensive day gown with a parasol shielding her from the sun, her glossy dark curls piled atop her head and a smirk on her full mouth.

It was the smirk that startled him, full of a viciousness that Hannibal hadn’t expected, and it immediately put him off. He stepped closer to Will on instinct, tensing in response to an unspoken threat.

“Mina,” Will breathed, every bit of love he’d ever felt for her welling to the surface. She was effortlessly beautiful, a petal blush on her creamy skin, her blue eyes sparkling with good health, her long lashes as curled and perfect as her dark hair.

“My sad little mirror,” she teased, reaching up with a gloved hand to cup his cheek as she always had. “We’re less alike now than we were.”

Her blue eyes flicked to Hannibal and she said, “Good afternoon, Lord Clarges.”

“Lady Rathmore,” Hannibal said, focusing on where her hand lay on Will’s cheek and how bespelled he seemed. “I’ve been anticipating meeting you for... what? Some six years, now?”

She cocked her head and laughed, a floating and contrived sound, but at least she dropped her hand.

“You must have Will in a panic with that infamous tongue of yours,” she said, smiling at them both.

“Sadly, he has not yet had the benefit of my tongue,” Hannibal said, pleased when Will blushed and Mina’s blue eyes widened in startlement. “Since I’ve returned there has been nothing but throwing of valuables, arguing, and an astonishing amount of violence.”

A thread of nervousness shaded the furtive flick of Mina’s eyes from Hannibal to Will, as if seeking proof of abuse on his pale skin.

With a smirk of pure relish, Hannibal added, “I have no idea how anyone survives him, frightening as he is.”

“Frightening as he is, Lord Clarges?” she asked, her voice small.

Will angled a look up at him, torn between laughter and outrage, but it was enough to nudge him out of his surprise. He smiled despite himself when Hannibal looked down at him and said, “Just look at him, ferocious and prickly. Yes, there is an unbearable plethora of sharpness given on a daily basis, I’m afraid.”

“Shame on you, Will, for abusing him so,” Mina said, following it with a sultry laugh that sounded quite practiced to Hannibal’s discerning ear. “The gossip is backwards on that count.”

“It can be dangerous to listen to gossip,” Hannibal warned her. “I’m very glad I did not listen to those rumors you were having an affair with an actor. How terribly mortifying that would be for you, if people listened to such things.”

Will sighed and Mina just looked furious, a faint crease in her brow smoothing quickly when she realized it.

“Shame on you, Will, for abusing him so,” Mina said, following it with a sultry laugh that sounded quite practiced to Hannibal’s discerning ear. “The gossip is backwards on that count.”

“Will you excuse us, Lord Clarges?” she asked, looping her hand through Will’s arm. “I would like to catch up with my brother.”

Hannibal was reluctant to do so, but said with a strained smile, “Will doesn’t require my permission in anything, Lady Rathmore.”

His gaze lingered on Will’s troubled face and he felt the strangest inclination to accompany him. Instead, he watched them begin on the stone path around the lake, so alike in so many respects it was uncanny.

“Lord Clarges! There you are! I have been dying to speak to you!”
“If only I were so lucky,” Hannibal breathed, and pasted on a smile that surely must look every bit as false as if felt.

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“Mina, what are you doing here?” Will asked, his initial surprise at seeing his sister fading to curiosity.

“Darling, after that frightening letter you wrote me, what did you expect I would do?” she asked, tipping her head to him. “Tell me, has that terrible husband of yours given you any suspicion with his actions since your accident?”

“No, Mina, nothing,” Will said, his anxiety rising with her words. “I am not even sure it was by his hand, in all honesty. I acted in haste, in thoughtless haste. I would never say he is behaving as he should, but he is making an effort to be polite to me…”

“To get close enough to harm you, you mean!” Mina said, not buying it. “Men like that never change, dearest, believe me.”

“Honestly, Mina, I should never have written my unfounded fears to you, I was just—”

“Frightened,” she said, hugging his arm in hers. Will found the soft brush of her skirts against his leg, the familiar scent of her perfume, the nearness of her and pressure of her arm on his were all things he had missed and adored, things that soothed his growing worry. “Will, someone has tried to kill you. Considering your husband’s reputation, it takes little imagination to lay it at his feet.”

“I was... informed there has been another in his past who has thwarted him and, perhaps, paid with their life,” Will reluctantly told her, concern furrowing his brow when he thought of Matthew’s warning. “I had no idea to whom he referred or under what circumstances, but it gives me pause.”

“As well it should! There is terrible gossip about your husband, Will, and I believe it is just what this person was hinting at,” Mina said, halting when Will stopped in his tracks. “I don’t normally pay attention to such things, but considering he is here now, back in his ancestral home with you, I cannot be silent! I feel I should tell you, Will, as you have suffered one accident already, that it might not be the last.”

“Mina,” Will said, his rapid retreat forcing her to grasp his face again, staring into his mirroring blue eyes.

“Will, listen to me and listen well,” she said in an urgent whisper. “Lord Clarges was married once before, for a short time only, right before he took on his commission. Indeed, he fled to the military to escape possible charges for her death, his late Lady Clarges.”

Will stilled in her grasp, a deep and terrible fear rising up inside of him that he didn’t want to acknowledge, didn’t want to be true.

“They were married less than a month, Will, and she died under such mysterious circumstances no one properly knows what happened,” Mina said, leaning close to hiss the words against his ear. “His grandfather made discreet compensation to her family and cleared the way for his return home. Will, I would never dare repeat such unfounded misery, but I fear for your safety.”

“I have been six years at Hartford House—” Will began, unwilling to believe it could be true, his thoughts snaring on the fact that Hannibal had been married once before, unbeknownst to himself.

“And he has been six years away,” she cut in, overriding him. “Will, listen to me. If he is back now, it is only to be rid of you, and this episode you described only confirms it! He has murdered a wife once already, by all designs one of his choosing who happened to displease him somehow. How much more danger are you in, Omega that you are, when he could easily be rid of you?”

Will pulled away from her grip, rejecting it, but the seed was already planted. His eyes traveled back to Hannibal, a lion among sheep, standing tall next to the graceful and delicate form of a woman who was tittering and fawning on him, the picture of every feminine excess he desired.

“I am frightened for you, Will,” Mina purred into his ear. “Look at him. Even now he could be searching for your replacement. It is why they throw themselves at him, Will. They know you are unsuitable and he will soon find a way to be rid of you.”

Hannibal’s amber eyes caught Will’s and he dropped his gaze, turning away in time with Mina to give him their backs.

“Don’t fret, darling,” she cooed, tugging him to walk with her. “You are clever and resourceful, Will. If you are alert and know what he is about, then he might not get the best of you.”
“He wants an heir,” Will said. “At least, I think he does. His sincerity is suspect and his humor is ghastly, so it is difficult to
tell.”

“Then you must not give him one,” Mina quickly said, and tugged on him to chide him, “Come, now, Will, use your Gift! You have seen enough of him to see yourself through his eyes!”

“Rather more than that, Mina, I’m afraid,” Will admitted, shivering. “I have bonded to him.”

She stopped again. She was breathless with dread when she said, “Will, you never!”

“I couldn’t control it,” he said, a poor defense. “Mina, I... my Gift—my curse—was bearing on me and he was rightfully
displeased with me and it just... happened.”

“He terrified you into it, is that what you mean?” she asked, and lay her hand along his cheek to pet him. “My darling, what a terrible reward for your love of me you’ve been given. A one-way bond to a man who detests you is a pitiable and
terrible thing. No wonder you are so wan! No color in your cheeks, no life in your eyes. My poor dear.”

Will flinched from her assessment, but accepted it as he had always accepted her.

“Mina... is that why you were so frightened when Mr. Stammets came with the contract?” Will asked, his voice a pained,
soft whisper. “Because you were afraid he would do the same to you as he had to the former Lady Clarges?”

There was sorrow in her blue eyes as she gazed at him, but no contrition, only the sharp determination of self-preservation
Will had suffered for more than once in their childhood.

“You understand, Will, don’t you?” she asked, softly and gently as if imparting the sweetest of life’s secrets. “Why I would
wish to avoid him? You understand your place with him, as well? How fragile it is? How he sees you?”

“Yes, Mina, I know it very well,” he said, breathing the truth she wanted to hear.

“So you understand how I worry for you?” she pressed.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“I beg you to have a care, Will,” she said, satisfied she had delivered her warning. “I do not wish to lose my twin.”

“I will be as careful as I can, Mina,” Will said, offering a tense, nervous laugh, his thoughts turning once more to his riding
accident. “All things considered.”

“To that end, darling, I am sending someone to keep an eye on things,” she informed him. “I spoke with father and he, too,
is very concerned about the situation you have found yourself in.”

“Father—”

“No, don’t be so surprised, dearest, you are his child in the end,” she reminded him. “No matter his disappointment in you, he has no wish to see you buried before your time, and neither do I.”

Will felt he could argue that point, but held his tongue as Mina said, “Do you recall Francis, darling?”

“Vaguely,” Will said, frowning. “We were very young when he left.”

“Yes, we were,” Mina said, pulling him back into motion on the path. “But I found him some time ago and gave him
employment in my Household. He is invaluable to me, dedicated and loyal as he is, and he remembers you fondly.”

“I cannot imagine why he would,” Will admitted. “I hardly recall him.”

“It’s little matter,” she said, waving his doubt away. “I have dispatched him to Hartford House with instructions to keep
you safe, and that is precisely what he will do.”

“Mina!” Will said, appalled. “You cannot possibly send another Alpha to Hartford House! His Grace would never stand for
it! Hannibal would never stand for it! Even if he is a servant, he is still—”

“Tell them he is coming ahead of me, then,” she said, smiling and amused by his worries. “Inform them I have decided to
retire to the country to spend time with my darling brother.”

Will hesitated, questioning her motives when she had not once attempted to contact him in all this time.

“Will, are you terribly cross with me?” she asked, able, as always, to sense his disquiet and guessing the cause.

“Why would I be cross with you, Mina?” Will asked, hardly aware of the soft deference in his voice, it was so ingrained in
him to cater to her.

“For pushing you into his bed in my place,” Mina said, smiling when he blushed. “For abandoning you to his nastiness and
not speaking to you in six years?”
“You have had a life to live, Mina, the same as I,” Will said, letting his strange distrust fade to the back of his awareness. “I imagined you were happy and enjoying yourself; that is all I hoped for.”

“Ah, well, yes,” she said, leaning into him. “Life as Lady Rathmore was an enjoyable enough distraction, I suppose. Timothy and I do not suit so well as I imagined as a child, but that’s neither here nor there.”

After a pensive, troubled silence, Will asked, “Would you truly come stay with me at Hartford House, Mina?”

“Darling, of course!” she said, hugging his arm yet again, her touch a comfort he had missed for too long. “I often thought of you over the years, shuttered away at that awful old house with only an old man for company. How lonely you must have been, my poor darling. I would be delighted to come relieve your tedium! What fun we shall have together again, Will!”

She gave him another squeeze and pulled him back along the path, glowing with accomplishment.

Hannibal was extremely unsettled by the way Will and his sister had been staring at him when he’d chanced to look up. It was eerie to see two such similar people so dissimilarly dressed, watching him with the same blue eyes but with one set narrowed and the other sorrowful.

He was immediately suspicious what that woman—because a sister would have at least attempted a visit in the last six years and none of Will’s relatives had even tried—was filling Will’s head with.

Luckily for him, Will was too intelligent by far to be easily diverted from the facts, but Hannibal knew there were plenty of damning facts to conjure Will’s melancholy to the fore. In a matter of seconds, he could think of dozens and that prompted him to say to the woman clinging to his arm, “Should you like to meet my spouse and in-law, Miss Green?”

“Your spouse?” she echoed, too thoughtless to keep the surprise out of her voice. “Lord Clarges, I had no idea she was here! I am simply dying to meet her!”

“Yes, just here,” Hannibal said, dragging her towards Will and his sister, who had slowed to a stop again. He could swear when Will noticed them approaching there was sudden fear in his gaze and Hannibal wondered at the cause. He had not seen such a thing from his spouse since his return, and had done nothing to his knowledge to provoke actual fear. By the time he reached them, poor Miss Green quite out of breath from his pace, Hannibal was sure he had been mistaken.

“Lord Clarges,” Will said, taking a step back in tandem with Mina, both of them rather alarmed by his sudden, urgent appearance. “My sister was just confirming her plans to take an extended stay in the countryside. Her guard will be arriving tomorrow ahead of her.”

“How lovely,” Hannibal said, forcing a smile. “I have no means to protest, considering. Ah, excuse me, introductions are in order. May I present Miss Green? Miss Green, this is my spouse—”

“So delighted to make your acquaintance, Lady Clarges,” Miss Green simpered, directing it at Mina, whose smirk returned full force.

“Gods no, not that one,” Hannibal corrected, turning her by her shoulders to face Will. “I realize they are twins, but they are not so similar as all that. No, Will is my spouse.”

“Lord Clarges?” she asked, confusion stealing her smile when she beheld Will’s stony, blank expression. “But, Lord Clarges, how on earth do you expect an heir?”

“Oh, dear,” Mina said, chuckling softly in a way that set Hannibal’s teeth on edge. “I believe I see an acquaintance enjoying the music. If you will all excuse me?”

Will’s face tightened imperceptibly as his twin hastened away and his mouth pressed into an alarmingly taut line. Hannibal was quite wise enough to his moods to read Will’s agitation when he saw it and frowned at the woman who was in serious danger of earning herself a trouting.

Before he could point out the obvious, Miss Green cried with utter simple-minded realization, “Why, you’re Omegan!”

“Yes,” Will said, his voice calm and steady despite the slight blush that graced his cheeks. Hannibal couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed or about to plunge the unfortunately-dim young lady into the nearby lake.

“But I had heard Lord Clarges wouldn’t go near an Omega!” she tittered, looking to Hannibal for approval.

“A spasm of confusion marred her brow and Hannibal cleared his throat to keep from laughing at her puzzlement.
“My darling girl,” Hannibal said, wishing he could set her down but unable to hold her own stupidity against her. “I am sure you have simply misunderstood.”

“Have I?” she asked, and tittered nervously. “I would simply die should I give offense!”

“And yet here you stand,” Will said, ever so mild. “Miraculous.”

“Shall we?” Hannibal asked, sweeping Will past her.

“Are we late for something, Lord Clarges?” Will asked, irritated by the jolt of nerves he felt when Hannibal took hold of him.

“I felt compelled to remove you before you drew blood from that ignorant, spoiled creature,” Hannibal said. “Do try, Will, not to sharpen your claws on such a simpleton. She is no match for you in any regard and is a dreadful gossip simply dying about everything. She will carry news of your status far and wide.”

“Interesting, Lord Clarges, how you defend that ignorant, spoiled creature for the very qualities which you revile in Omegas,” Will observed, his stride quickening in time with his temper.

“I revile stupidity in any package, Will,” Hannibal said. “Not exclusively in Omegas. There are numerous important reasons why I do not associate closely with such people as Miss Green.”

“I was made to understand—and thoroughly—that your revilement is exclusively for Omegas,” Will said, unwilling to stop now that he had a chance to get some answers. “It makes me wonder, Lord Clarges, what you must have suffered to make such associations.”

“My suffering is none of your business!” Hannibal informed him, escorting him back towards the manor house with every intention to set out for home no matter the early hour.

“It is when it affects me,” Will said, keeping pace with him despite their height difference. “I think, considering I bear the brunt of the result, I should know the source of your opinions!”

“I will not speak on this subject one second longer,” Hannibal said, his voice sharp and clipped. Will flinched again, but it was gone in a heartbeat. Still, there was no mistaking his tension and it prickled Hannibal’s instinct to protect him from what had made him so nervous.

Such a quandary when he himself seemed to be the cause.

“Why do you flinch from me?” he asked, alarmed when Will met his gaze with a challenge in his eyes, again bracing as if expecting violence. “Will Graham, what on earth has come over you? Why are you acting as if you fear me?”

Will tipped his head up and said, “I will not speak on this subject one second longer, Lord Clarges.”

Hannibal drew up and opened his mouth to question him further, but was forestalled by Aunt Margaret waving them down from the upper garden where Grandfather was greeting and visiting with acquaintances. Her beckoning interrupted them, luckily, before any more harsh words were exchanged, but it came far too late to prevent the damage that had already been done.

The two of them stiffly took their places at Grandfather’s side where Will put his hand on the old Alpha’s shoulder, seeking to steady his nerves after what Mina had told him and his small, heated clash with Hannibal. There was little time to dwell on it, however; they were converged on by friends and family all eager to meet Will as well as speak with their long-absent future Duke.

“And have you had the pleasure of meeting Miss Lounds?” Aunt Margaret inquired, her innocent tone putting Hannibal on his guard.

“Yes, Aunt Margaret, we have. She is a very beautiful young lady and suits Anthony very well,” Will said, calming when Hannibal’s scent lost the smoky undertone of threat that seemed to coil around his senses. He felt less exposed here, with the stone wall to his back and Roland to one side, and he tried not to be nervous of the people around him, many of whom had snubbed him six years ago.

“Lovely girl,” Aunt Grace said, fanning herself. “We are very lucky she accepted our Anthony’s proposal!”

“Miss Lounds will do quite nicely, provided she doesn’t amuse herself by insulting Will again. I refuse to stand for it and she should have better manners,” Hannibal said to her.
“No, you simply cannot withhold your approval now, Hannibal!” Aunt Grace said, rousing her temper in the wake of his statement. “Such a rare opportunity to find a young lady of her persuasion unattached! Your cousin is a very lucky boy, Hannibal, and I won’t stand for you obstructing him!”

“I have no other reason with that aside, Aunt Grace, and no intentions of ruining Anthony’s chances for happiness,” Hannibal said, risking a look at Will’s tense, uncomfortable face. “Ruin one life is quite enough, I’ve learned.”

“Tuo,” Will softly corrected. “It has not been as exciting as your own, Lord Clarges, but I believe mine still counts as a life?”

“It was yours I was referring to,” Hannibal said, noting how his eyes widened in a split second of surprise, a glimpse of the true Will beneath his reserve.

“Children,” Roland said, reminding them they were not in private. “Some conversations are best left to the bedchamber, don’t you think?”

Will blushed to the roots of his hair and Hannibal sighed, wondering if he was half as provoking as his grandfather could sometimes be.

Will gradually relaxed, able to fade into the background of conversation as the afternoon crept on. He kept an anxious eye out for his sister, but she never approached. Most of those gathered in Roland’s vicinity were family of one ilk or another to the Dimmonds and knew Hannibal well, though they were mostly strangers to Will. It must have shown in his expression, as Hannibal leaned closer to ask, “Are you putting faces to names so far, Will?”

“Yes,” Will said, realizing Grandfather had shifted his chair away, leaving Will in Hannibal’s company, caught in a small bubble of privacy within the press of people. “There are a great many of them. More than Anthony has mentioned.”

“More than he is probably aware of,” Hannibal said, his smile wry. “Anthony has no great interest in the extended family. Something I suppose he will need to develop when he becomes Master of Fernhill in Uncle Robert’s—”

“You’re looking well, Lord Clarges. And is this the mysterious spouse we’ve all been hearing of?”

Will braced when his hand was swept up and delivered to a whiskered face for a wet and entirely inappropriate kiss. He looked down at his trapped hand, then transferred his bland gaze to the person holding it. Under his disapproving, offended stare, the man hastily dropped his hand with an uncomfortable chuckle.

“Darnell,” Hannibal said, doing his best not to bristle, though the sight of that bounder taking liberties with Will’s person mortally tested his self-control.

The gleeful, predatory look on Darnell’s face was only matched by the cunning expression his wife wore. “Have a care with my spouse, if you please. Will dislikes being inexpertly handled,” Hannibal said, knowing well enough if Will wasn’t in the mood to tolerate it, he certainly would make his displeasure known.

“Warning me off of your pretty mate, my boy?” Darnell asked, chuckling.

“As a matter of fact, I am,” Hannibal said, ever so cordial. “And it’s Lord Clarges, in case it escaped you.”

Will bristled next to him, but held his tongue out of respect for Roland. He had no desire to embarrass or shame the man who had sheltered him these many years if he could help it, but he chafed to remind Hannibal he didn’t need his dubious protection. Not anymore.

“You needn’t worry so for him, Lord Clarges,” Darnell said, openly leering. “I don’t bite.”

“Oh, I have no worries for Will, Darnell,” Hannibal said, his smile entirely indulgent, though beginning to strain at the edges with temper. “He is more than capable of dealing with any man whose hands might seek to wander where they are most certainly not welcome. I only hope you won’t test him in that regard; you will certainly come out the worst for it. Agitating my husband is extremely dangerous, I’ve learned.”

Much to Will’s surprise, Hannibal was serious, and was smirking at Mr. Darnell’s consternation.

“Speaking of not welcome,” Hannibal said, maneuvering the conversation to his advantage. “I believe you are acquainted with my spouse, Mrs. Darnell?”

Her sharp, unhappy face nearly caught fire with the blush that filled her cheeks.

“Will?” Hannibal asked, looking down at him so that Will was unexpectedly the focus of their attention.

“Yes,” Will said, tipping his chin a bit higher, his shoulders straight and stiff with his pride. “We met at your soiree.”
“I’m afraid I don’t recall,” she said, her smile so forced and false Hannibal was amazed it did not crack around the edges and fall right off her face.

“I accompanied Lord du Maurier when I was newly married,” Will said, considering her closely, knowing she knew him and knew precisely how she had treated him. He could see the brittle fear in her face, vacuous terror of stepping wrong in a Society that could break her like an aged, dried twig. Terror of mistakes exposed, gossip turned back to bite, shamed and shunned for misguided attempts to fit in.

He felt pity for her, selfish and self-important woman that she was, married to a lecher with a roving eye and no standards, trapped in a marriage as empty and meaningless as the good opinions she worked so hard to engender. An empty life spent half in fear and half in vicious enjoyment of the suffering of others. So long as she was not the target, never the target, and that was why they always looked, all of them. Searching restlessly to find fault in others to paper the cracks in their own character...

“I imagine you would not remember it,” Will said, seeing relief fill her eyes. He waited a heartbeat and added, “I had nearly forgotten all about it. One soiree is very much like another, I fear.”

“Yes,” she said, her pride offended, but she didn’t dare give it away. “I do hope you will attend future events, with my warm welcome, of course! We would be so delighted to have you!”

“I have very little doubt of that,” Hannibal said, immensely enjoying the frank irritation on Mr. Darnell’s face as he realized what was happening.

“Thank you, that is very kind,” Will said. “However, my time is precious and I prefer to spend it on things which are important enough to warrant the loss.”

Hannibal’s brows rose and he grinned, saying with pleased indulgence, “Will has been running Hartford House for Grandfather for the past six years. I am afraid he has very little time for provincial gatherings as his presence will be in such high demand when the Season commences, now that the estate is in such good working order.”

“I-is that the Baileys?” Mrs. Darnell asked, peering intently anywhere but at Will for anything that might offer polite escape from the line of fire.

“Yes, I believe it is!” Mr. Darnell said, quick to throw in his support. “If you will excuse us, Lords Clarges?”

They departed with near immediacy. Hannibal smiled at them as they eased away, his hand falling to the small of Will’s back without his permission or awareness.

Will stiffened slightly, an unintentional response to his own nerves. He wasn’t entirely sure how much store to set in what his sister said, but he couldn’t discount it out of hand, either. His cut girth strap had been no accident. He could not in good conscience condemn Hannibal without proof, but there was no convincing his tightly-strung nerves of that.

Hannibal didn’t retreat, not while the Darnells were still casting uncertain, assessing looks their way as they merged back into the crowd. The moment they were out of eye shot, however, Hannibal dropped his hand. Will’s continued nervousness did not escape him, nor did his relief when Hannibal put some space between them.

Hannibal’s mate was frightened of him, just as he’d suspected. He was hiding it well, but he was frightened nonetheless and Hannibal hadn’t the first idea how to address it.

“Mrs. Darnell will certainly think twice before crossing you in the future,” Hannibal said, noting Will seemed somewhat overwhelmed on top of the bubbling nervousness that kept him looking restlessly at the crowd. Tension strained the corners of his full mouth and tightened his slender body, his subtle agitation not lost on Hannibal.

Despite not wishing to upset his spouse again, Hannibal decided to take Will somewhere quiet with the vague idea he might be able to get to the heart of whatever had scared him. He wasn’t entirely sure how to approach the subject, but if anything he would at least see that Will got a much-needed break from the festivities.

Gods knew Hannibal could use one.

He lightly touched Will’s elbow to get his attention and waited for Will’s troubled gaze to lift to his own.

“Don’t object, please, just come quietly,” he said, steering Will behind a row of potted shrubs, past the alert servants, and in through an unmanned door.

Once inside, he took Will directly to the Fernhill library, which was blessedly empty. He let go of Will’s arm the moment he was able, hoping to prevent another swell in Will’s sudden, strange fear of him.
No one had marked their absence, Hannibal noted with relief. He closed the door quietly, and when he turned he saw Will was already a good measure less tense just being away from the crowd. “You need to tell me when things become too much, Will. You aren’t used to these events, after all, and I do not relish my relations to such an extent I cannot bear to be out of their company.”

“It would not seem terribly intelligent of me to bring more of my faults to your attention, Lord Clarges,” Will said, his voice quiet but his tone as feisty as ever.

“If growing weary of my pushy sea of scolding relatives is a fault, Will, then it is one we share,” Hannibal said, moving closer and frowning when Will moved further away. Wondering just what on earth Lady Rathmore had whispered into Will’s ear and hoping to get the truth of it, Hannibal remarked, “You are skittish as a fawn, Will Graham.”

“But not as harmless as one,” Will warned, shooting a sharp look over one shoulder. He moved to the bookcase and looked over the selections, landing on a volume with a soft exclamation of surprise. He pulled it free, saying, “I was reading this very book at Hartford House! If you have no qualms, Lord Clarges, then I will spend some time quietly here.”

“My only qualm is that you expect me to leave,” Hannibal said, and bluntly added, “I refuse to go back out there. I am thoroughly exhausted of them all.”

That won a brief, small smile from Will. “They have not had a chance to visit with you, Hannibal, for so long, considering you were gone at war for nearly ten years, then put them off six more—”

He was interrupted by a trilling voice calling, “Hannibal?! Will dear?! Where are you?!”

Hannibal glanced about in half a panic, judged the settee too small to hide them both, and promptly went to the window.

“What are you doing?” Will hissed, skating a wild-eyed glance at the door as footsteps and Aunt Grace’s unmistakable voice neared.

Hannibal forced the pane open and slung his leg out. Pausing there with one foot to freedom, he held out his hand to Will and asked, “Are you coming?”

Will hesitated, too surprised to respond. The great Lord Clarges, Marquess and future Duke, slipping out of a window like a thief to escape his Aunt. Will stifled his laugh but couldn’t hide his slight, amused smile. Hannibal certainly didn’t seem like a man plotting murder, just a man who had experienced quite enough familial chastisement to suit him for one day.

It was a split-second decision on Will’s part. He blamed it on the compulsion of his bond rather than a slip in his own judgment, even knowing he most certainly should not be alone with Hannibal Lecter. Clutching his book to his chest, he took Hannibal’s steadying hand and followed him out onto the lawn.

“The trick,” Hannibal whispered, easing the window closed, “is to go somewhere they wouldn’t think to look.”

“I think parting from the other guests is a good start,” Will remarked, flattening against the cool manor wall when the library door was flung open for a searching glance. After a tense, frozen silence, Hannibal laced Will’s fingers in his own and pulled him down the closest path, hoping not to be seen. “Everyone is gathering on the lawn, we should join them. It was rude of me to wish otherwise.”

“There is nothing rude about needing a bit of space, Will,” Hannibal said, his hand warm and sure around Will’s fingers. “No, we will find a quiet place out of the sun for a bit.”

His amber eyes slid to the lake and lit on the small armada of party boats servicing the otherwise-occupied guests of Fernhill. They were fine rowing vessels meant for two, each with a billowing canopy to block the sun and, luckily enough for him, all empty just now.

“Though I doubt it was under these circumstances,” he said, hurrying towards them with Will at his side. “I believe we can use one of those.”

“One of these?” Will asked, surprised by the small boat Hannibal directed him towards. It was a delicate and lovely vessel with padded seats and plump pillows, for all the world a place for lovers to lounge alone.

His cheeks flamed with brilliant heat. He was aghast at even the idea of it, the surprise overcoming the tug of his bond so that the potential danger of his situation returned in a startling rush.

It didn’t do so in time for him to avoid Hannibal’s hands, however. He was caught around the waist and deposited into the boat like he was nothing more than a sack of potatoes.

“Lord Clarges—”
Hannibal moved in after him, forcing Will to retreat to the stern, skittering back over the rowing bench to land in a pile of pillows on his backside. “Honestly!”

“You may lodge a complaint with me momentarily,” Hannibal said, unmooring the boat and pushing away from the small tie-on. He slid onto the rowing bench, planting his boots on either side of Will’s spread legs, and promptly set about turning them. “Your nerves are frayed. You need quiet.”

“This is not helping,” Will said, eyes blazing as he struggled to sit up, finally gaining a semblance of dignity by working the pillows into a seat of sorts, though he was scrunched into the stern.

Hannibal, focused on getting the boat turned and away from land on all sides, spared him a look and said with a smirk, “You look like an angry kitten.”

“If you have brought me here to insult me—”

“Ah, hush,” Hannibal said, chuckling. “When you get furious, it does not help your cause. Just relax and read your book.”

Will glowered at him, weighing his intentions. He didn’t feel anything particularly murderous from Hannibal, no prickle of anticipation from him, no building determination to do him in. He seemed relaxed, focused on rowing the boat without paying particular attention to Will at all.

Will tried hard to reason that Hannibal, should he wish to do so, would never dare try to drown him here at his family’s annual Garden Party.

He very much doubted it would be worth the cost of the scandal that would follow.

Relaxing somewhat, Will settled back and opened the book with a prim air that made Hannibal chuckle all over again.

“You family will be furious,” Will said after a long silence, his blue eyes lifting from his book to sneak a look at his husband again.

“They are gentlefolk,” Hannibal said, resting from his rowing to let the boat drift lazily towards the center of the lake. “They will be furious quietly, within the bounds of common decency, and in the privacy of their own thoughts.”

Will huffed a soft laugh, wriggling into a more comfortable position and stretching his legs. He made a soft sound of surprise when Hannibal let go of the oar to grab his ankle, but he just propped Will’s booted foot up on the bench next to his hip and patted it.

Knowing he was tempting Hannibal to do the same to the other foot if he did not act, Will obligingly propped his other heel up next to it, finding the position quite comfortable for reading. The breeze was cool and the canopy kept off the sun, and with everyone on the lawn for games, they were alone on the water. The frogs sang their buzzing song in the shallows and an occasional dragonfly inspected them, but they were otherwise undisturbed. It was, in all, a peaceful quiet Will desperately needed.

He peered at Hannibal from the screen of his lashes, taking in his profile as Hannibal looked off towards the bank, his mouth pursed in thought and his sharp eyes flicking. It really wasn’t fair for him to be so compelling. It was easy for Will to want to forget the truths between them when he looked at Hannibal, when those amber eyes observed him and that perfect mouth of his parted on a wolfish grin.

He felt that tug within him, a strong pull to just push forward and wrap his arms around Hannibal’s waist and enjoy it, and cursed his bond to Hannibal for pressing on him yet again, an irresistible call towards the crumbling bluff.

“You’re smiling,” Hannibal said, catching his gaze, equal parts suspicious and amused. “What on earth are you thinking about that your cheeks are so pink?”

“It’s the heat,” Will said, diverting his attention to his book, his face coloring even more.

“You do seem exceptionally flushed,” Hannibal noticed. “Are you overwarm?”

“I’m very well, thank you,” Will said, finding it difficult to focus on his book when Hannibal decided to focus on him. Desperate to distract him, he asked, “Shall I read to you, Lord Clarges?”

“Goodness, how thoughtful,” Hannibal said, cocking an eyebrow at him. “I find myself amazed you have not yet bashed me about the skull with that thing.” Will scowled and Hannibal grinned, saying, “Please, do. You have a very pleasant voice, in all. It will be some little balm for the cacophony of my Aunt’s guests.”
Will cleared his throat, immediately regretting his decision due to the awkward placement of where he had left off. He shuffled the pages, annoyed when Hannibal said, “Pick up where you left off, if you please, Will. Perhaps that will explain your flush better than the paltry excuse of the heat.”

Glowering at him, Will defiantly skimmed down to where he’d last been reading at Hartford and began.

“Let one never forget, however, that vanity is the snake which bites the foot of the unwary man and renders him insufferable to his friends; indeed, the mark of a true gentleman is in his deportment, his character shewn in what he does not say in place of what he could. Silence, dear friend, is the blessing of such a man, who holds his accomplishments dear and speaks not of himself. Do not fall prey to self-credit, to excesses of feeling or passions that might move others. Neglect that piece of yourself for your own betterment. Stand fast in your understanding that there is no greater weakness, no greater mark against a gentleman’s character than to abandon himself to base desires and cling to what is outside of his own power and control. Limit thyself in such interactions and be ever wary of promises that have no grounding in truth and reason.”

“Even your reading material is bleak,” Hannibal said, wrinkling his nose.

“Did you expect a romance novel?” Will asked, relieved that Hannibal had not been paying too close attention. “Or something a child might read? Simplistic and rhyming?”

“Behave,” Hannibal warned, amused by Will’s dour look. It gave him some little hope he had been wrong, and the fear he’d thought he’d seen was merely the result of too many demands on Will in an unfamiliar environment. It was hope enough that he did not break their temporary truce with questions that would upset his spouse. “That is not an instruction for gentlemen, Will, that is an instruction for monkhood!”

“Abstinence from excessive feeling has its merits, Lord Clarges,” Will said, irritated by his summation. “This book was much present in my childhood, your opinions notwithstanding! My father found it an excellent example for me.”

“Your father sounds delightful,” Hannibal said. “Was he buried at the time?”

Will’s glare sharpened. “That is not funny.”

“Gods forbid we find levity, Chaplain Graham,” Hannibal said, prodding him until he saw the familiar gleam in Will’s eyes that usually preceded a coshing by mere seconds. “Lucky for me, I have both the oars and you value that book too much to slap me with it.”

“I am weighing the satisfaction of doing so against my host’s attachment to it,” Will warned him.

Hannibal smirked, well amused by his steady stare. “Be very careful, Will. You are nearly falling prey to ‘excesses of feeling or passion’.”

Will’s glare deepened but he refused to rise to the bait, much to Hannibal’s disappointment.

“Being wary of promises that have no grounding in truth and reason is an excellent method to avoid harm,” Hannibal said, frowning as he turned the words over in his mind, recalling each word merely from the remembered inflections of Will’s voice as he had spoken them. He examined them against his own experiences and said, “It is, however, the most dismal approach to love I have ever been exposed to.”

“For those of us who have not been exposed to love,” Will said, irritated that Hannibal had been paying closer attention than he’d first assumed, “it is a dire warning well heeded. Had I been silly enough to encourage feelings for you before we met, how much worse would it have gone for me once we did cross paths? The foolishness of my youth was tempered by such thoughtful and experienced warnings as those in this book.”

“And what of the foolishness of your adulthood?” Hannibal asked, unwilling to risk Will’s further ire by questioning him on how he had felt as a newly-married bride. He was no mage, able to reverse time and change what had already passed. No, it was the youth before him he was interested in; perhaps through him, Hannibal could make amends to the boy he’d been.

“Adulthood has proven that I was right to be so cautious,” Will said, closing the book with a snap. “As I have seen those around me greatly reduced in their circumstances for the folly of such notions as love. Lives have been ruined and altered beyond repair—not just those of the lovers, but of their children and families. It is a ridiculous notion that gives rise to ridiculous behavior.”

“So it is unseemly to love?” Hannibal asked, intrigued.

“Of course it is,” Will said, remembering himself and turning his face away to look out at the water. “Familial affection is ingrained in us, but to step beyond that is to encourage destruction.”
“Or retribution?” Hannibal fished, watching him closely. “Do you believe, Will, that there is some power outside of yourself which seeks to destroy any happiness or relief you may find?”

Will’s sharp glance confirmed his suspicions, and Hannibal softly said, “That is a very sad thing, indeed.”

“I do not require your pity, Lord Clarges, nor your observations,” Will said, his voice stiff, embarrassed to have given away one of his deepest-held beliefs. “The circumstances of my life have taught me well enough what I may expect in my future. Not everyone gets a happy ending.”

Hannibal held his gaze, wondering at the sudden challenge he saw in Will’s fierce blue eyes, almost as if he expected an unpleasant reaction in return. Wishing to allay him, Hannibal said, “Well, certainly not with that attitude.”

Will blinked, startled. He had expected Hannibal to respond to his statement, to realize Will knew about the saddle, about his intentions. He did not expect such a droll reply and it baffled him. It made him wonder if, just perhaps, Hannibal had not been the one to cut his girth strap after all.

But if not his husband, then who?

“Had I any notion such a power existed,” Hannibal said, leaning slightly closer, “I would thumb my nose at it. I would chase love to the ends of the earth, drown myself in happiness, and dare it to attempt to strip it from me.”

Mystified, Will read his belief in his expression; indeed, he could see it was just how Hannibal truly did live his life—spitting in the eyes of the gods and doing as he pleased, secure in his own power.

“They wouldn’t dare take anything from you,” he whispered, seeing the pattern through the course of Hannibal’s life, defiance after defiance. Not in marriage, nor station, nor study would he be anything other than precisely what he wished. “You have elevated yourself to their level and they are afraid.”

“But you aren’t,” Hannibal murmured, unabashedly pleased.

Will started, shaking his head to cast off his Gift, a potential of understanding that never quite bore fruit. He clutched his book to his chest and murmured, “I would not say I am not, Lord Clarges. But my fear is tempered by my understanding of how little you fear in return.”

His blue eyes shifted, mournful and beautiful and sparkling like jewels behind his thick lashes. “A man who fears nothing is capable of anything.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal said, his gaze dropping to Will’s soft mouth, to the stubborn tuck of his lower lip, as if Nature herself had known what he would become and had armed him accordingly. He thought of their faux kiss in the hedge maze, how warm Will had been and how calmly he’d played along, and his heart picked up in answer.

He leaned closer, his strange intensity affecting Will, who pushed back into the stern, folding his legs up to frame a wall between them.

“What are you doing?” Will asked, brandishing the book at him. “Why are you Alphas always sniffing people?”

“I’m not sniffing you, I’m examining you,” Hannibal said, congratulating himself on his inspired quick thinking. “You’re flushed. You might be overheated, in which case all this—” he gestured at Will’s neckerchief and jacket, “—would need to come off.”

“I will do nothing of the sort!” Will said, appalled, and lurched sideways to find a more dignified and proper position.

The boat bobbed hard with his movement and shifted. Hannibal swayed forward on the bench to catch his balance, not expecting the sudden motion, and Will reacted instinctively.

Without thinking of the consequences, he shoved back against the man tipping towards him and sent Hannibal tumbling over the side of the boat into the green-tinged water with a huge splash.

“Oh my goodness!” Will gasped in shocked horror, eyes wide. He dropped his book and grasped the side of the rocking boat, leaning over to look down at the frothing water. “Hannibal! Hannibal!”

Hannibal surfaced, sputtering and treading water, just as surprised as Will was.

It was not, however, until he glared at Will that Will felt the first stirrings of amusement and clapped his hands over his mouth in a vain effort to hold it in.

“Will Graham,” Hannibal said, blowing water out of his face, his wet hair hanging around his forehead. “If you laugh, I swear to all the gods—”
Will’s laughter escaped him, then, undone by the stern warning from a man trying to be dignified while treading water. He hitched with laughter, squeezing his sides, his slender shoulders shaking and tears welling in his blue eyes.

“You violent little harpy!” Hannibal cursed, but felt a smile curve his lips in response to Will’s laughter. He’d never seen him so undone and his laughter was infectious, carefree and raspy, without the edge of sardonic bite that always seemed to tinge his throaty voice.

He grasped the side of the boat to steady it and looked up at his spouse, asking with a grin, “Are you enjoying yourself?”

Will laughed helplessly, wiping his cheeks with his hands and trying to get himself under control. Once the worst of it had passed, he tentatively moved to the side of the boat where Hannibal was clinging and offered his hand, saying with burbling laughter, “I am so sorry, Lord Clarges. Let me help you out.”

Hannibal looked up at him, at his open face which looked his age for a change, no shadow clinging to his eyes, no tension around his mouth. He looked so dammably innocent it pained Hannibal to think of how much he had done to tear that from him. His aloof and easily-riled mate who believed happiness was a tool the gods used to punish those who dared reach for it and lived a thin, measly thread of a life bereft of any comforts when he should be drowning in them.

Seized with an impulse he couldn’t ignore, Hannibal reached up for him, his wet, warm fingers sliding into Will’s curls to curve behind his ear.

Startled, Will found himself not pulling away, his heart hammering in his ears and his eyes glued to Hannibal’s. The strange, intense look on his husband’s face held him captive and the soft, unexpected touch vibrated through his skin. He shivered and blamed it on the slight breeze, but knew the true reason was the gentle brush of fingers against his face, the touch six years overdue and all the more affecting for it.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his laughter fading so that the words were barely better than an exhale.

“I didn’t steal a kiss in the maze,” Hannibal said, a slight smile on his lips. “I should very much like to rectify that. May I rectify that?”

“Then we are all the better for being alone,” Hannibal said.

Will’s pulse sped, even as his common sense urged him to pull back, to grab the oars and row away because Hannibal likely wanted him dead and this would be such a perfect chance.

But even the cliff threatening him deep inside of his soul could not still the soft shiver that coursed through him when Hannibal pulled up against the side of the boat with every clear intention to kiss him.

Hannibal’s fingers curved around the back of his skull and tugged him closer, lips parting. Will’s eyes flew wide and he uttered a stifled, enticing little yelp that made Hannibal’s blood rise to boiling point in an instant.

Hannibal’s tug shifted Will’s center of balance and he found the the small craft pushing away from him. Having taken all the abuse it could handle, it promptly tipped, dumping Will gracelessly out on top of his husband before righting itself to drift off in a bobbling wave.

Hannibal barely managed to keep them both from going under and hitched Will up, cursing the damned boat for interrupting a moment so ripe with potential.

“Well hell!” Will spat, his hands gripping Hannibal’s shoulders and his slender legs churning the water. He was entirely too close, smashed to Hannibal’s chest as he was. He could feel the warm muscle of Hannibal’s forearm against the small of his back steadying him, somehow worked beneath his jacket, which floated up behind him.

Hannibal grinned, one outflung arm balancing him, finding it easy enough to stay afloat with Will’s little legs paddling as furiously as they were. He was also delightfully disgruntled and temptingly close, doing his damnedest not to look at Hannibal even though they were nose to nose.

“Ah, there goes an oar,” Hannibal remarked, watching it slide from its open oarlock and drift off on ripples from the boat’s movement, “and the other as well.”

Will fought to turn, for any excuse not to be face to face after that strange and startling encounter, but Hannibal’s grip on his waist was unrelenting. More distracting was that Will could feel the length of him from chest to belly. He was desperately relieved their bodies were not pressed any closer below the waist because he was certain he would not survive the embarrassment of it.
He was so aggrieved that Hannibal chuckled, amused.

“I’m glad you find this situation laughable!” Will complained, making the mistake of tipping his face to Hannibal’s. When he saw Hannibal’s sharp-toothed grin, he couldn’t help but return it with a lopsided one of his own, realizing the absurdity of their situation.

“Tell me, Chaplain Graham, what about this situation is not laughable?” Hannibal asked, and when he laughed, Will chuckled in response. “Hold tight.”

Will held fast to his shoulders, his smile fading as his thoughts raced. He stared at his own white fingers clenched on Hannibal’s dark coat as his husband bore him through the green, murky water of the lake to reach the boat. His skin tingled where Hannibal touched him and he fought the urge to touch those same places, to see if some change would be felt in the texture of his skin, to discover if his own touch would wake a similar response or if it was something uniquely conditioned to his husband.

It preoccupied him so much as he was hefted onto the side of the boat that Hannibal’s hand on his backside came as a shocking surprise, so stunning Will had no time to protest before he was levered up by that touch to tumble back within.

He scrambled to his sodden knees, flailed while cursing the plump pillows that seemed everywhere, and managed to turn around to scowl at Hannibal.

“If I attempt to crawl back in as you have,” Hannibal said, using his grip on the side of the boat to guide himself to the stern. “I will capsize this unfortunately top-heavy creation.”

Will fell on his backside and gripped the boat’s sides as it began to turn. Cautiously, he made his way back to the stern where Hannibal was pushing, and just watched him as his efforts guided the light craft towards the shore.

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

Despite his panting, Hannibal managed to tell him, “Because it was the fastest way to get you back into the boat?”

“No, I——” Will flushed and broke off, wondering why he was prodding.

“You’re my spouse, Will,” Hannibal said, realizing what he was getting at. “There will be a bit more than an unfinished kiss between us before it’s said and done.”

Will’s eyes widened but he got that stubborn look on his face Hannibal had so quickly come to relish. Grinning, he added, “I understand it might make you nervous, considering you’ve never been kissed before.”

Will’s chin tipped up and he retreated from view. When he heard Hannibal’s satisfied, delighted laughter, however, he flung himself back to the stern and leaned over it with a nonchalance he did not quite feel to say, “It so happens, Lord Clarges, that I have no interest in kisses, unfinished or otherwise. I find the whole idea of it terribly dull.”

“Terribly dull?” Hannibal echoed, amused.

“Yes,” Will said, prim as a schoolmarm despite the telling pink in his cheeks. “I doubt the inconvenience required to create a child could even distract me from my book.”

He cracked said book open again, having retrieved it a little worse for wear from its trip but still usable, and felt for a change he had managed to render Hannibal speechless, which left him rather satisfied.

“Is that a challenge?” Hannibal asked, panting hard as he worked to bring the boat to shore. It didn’t stop him from grinning, however, well pleased with his little mate. “Or shall we set a bet?”

Wary, Will angled a look down at him and softly asked, “What?”

“A bet,” Hannibal said, the soft slurry beneath his feet solidifying to gravel and packed earth as the lake shallowed. “On whether or not I can distract you from your book.”

Will slammed the book closed again, heart racing and mouth tingling at even the suggestion of such a thing.

But it could work to his advantage, he knew. When he considered the bare facts, there was no danger in such a silly bet. Hannibal would not win. The likelihood of them ever sharing a bed was less than zero, and even should they do so, Hannibal would surely be unable to overcome his revulsion to perform any such act, let alone successfully. On the off chance he did manage to somehow win, his own deeply-ingrained distaste would keep Hannibal from anything more than puffing up like a gamecock and crowing of his victory.

“If I win, you will stop pestering me with such tenacious constancy,” he stated, deciding it was worth the risk.

Hannibal’s brows rose, impressed. “If I win, you have to let me kiss you whenever I like.”
“Whenever you like?” Will echoed, thinking that didn’t sound like a prize at all. “Are you sure you are not confused? Perhaps, if you win—”

“Whenever I like,” Hannibal firmly repeated, getting his feet solidly under him and standing to shove the boat towards the mooring.

“Very well,” Will said, holding the book carefully away from him and sliding to the rowing bench as Hannibal brought them to shore. “You have yourself a bet, Lord Clarges.”

Hannibal’s grin was so triumphant and woke such a clamor in Will’s nerves he immediately wished he could take it back. Little as he liked to admit it, if there was any one person on this earth who could rattle Will Graham, it was certainly his eccentric and overbearing husband.

Chapter 14

Dripping wet and entirely disheveled, Hannibal and Will made their way back up to Fernhill Manor. Luckily for them, the majority of party-goers were still enjoying their games on the lawn, though people were beginning to drift back towards the other, smaller activities so thoughtfully provided by the Dimmonds.

“Well,” Hannibal said, seeing Will shiver in his layers of wet clothing, the book held carefully away from him so as not to ruin it. “I don’t suppose that did much for your nerves?”

Will laughed softly, flicking a glance up at him, and admitted, “I was too worried we would drown to worry about the crowd, Lord Clarges. It was an unorthodox therapy, but not entirely unsuccessful.”

Hannibal smiled and took Will around the side of the manor, managing to catch a passing servant’s eye. When they were approached, he said, “Please inform my cousin that my spouse and I are in a predicament and need to speak with her.”

The man nodded and made as if to leave, but stopped when Will abruptly thrust the book out and said, “Please return this to the library as well. I will replace it if there has been any damage.”

“If that is the title I am thinking of, a fire would not be damage enough,” Bedelia said, drawn from the crowd by the oddity of a servant darting out of view. She looked at them both from head to toe, taking in their wet clothing and cautious expressions. “Explanations can wait, I believe.”

She took the book and sent the servant on his way, murmuring, “Come with me, please, both of you.”

Cheeks rosy with embarrassment, Will quietly followed Bedelia at Hannibal’s side, hoping she wouldn’t think too badly of him. He hadn’t pushed Hannibal with the intention to dunk him, but he was responsible nonetheless for Hannibal’s state.

Just as Hannibal was responsible for his state with that entirely uncalled-for advance.

“Both of you, please leave your wet things in the washroom,” she said, opening a door onto a lovely tiled room well lit by the afternoon sun. “Will, that door leads to the Violet room. Your clothing is in the wardrobe. I’ll see if father’s valet can assist you.”

“My clothing?” Will asked, bewildered as she urged him into the washroom. “Have I missed something?”

“Am I to assume I have clothing here as well? Or will I be wearing your purple silk?” Hannibal asked, cocking an eyebrow at his cousin as she closed Will into the washroom to clean up despite his obvious consternation. “Though I do imagine it will be a bit loose in the shoulders.”

Bedelia gave him a repressive look, not amused.

“You are incorrigible,” she said, her tone smooth despite her annoyance. “And I have no idea what you were up to with Will Graham—” she held up a staying hand when he looked as if he would like to interrupt her, “—but if you intend to get closer to your spouse, Hannibal, you might wish to start with something less... troublesome.”

Hannibal wrinkled his nose at her because he knew she disliked it, and pressed, “Well? Has Grandfather been meddling again?”

“That is something you should discuss with him,” Bedelia said, a faint, fleeting smile curving her mouth. “But yes, your clothes are in the wardrobe just there. Please give your husband time to tend to himself before you intrude on him, hm?”
She moved back the way they’d come and Hannibal let himself into the suite she’d indicated. Ignoring her warning, he immediately made his way to the washroom door where he knocked once, sharply.

“Yes?” Will called, approaching but making no move to open up.

“It’s only me,” Hannibal said. “I wanted to warn you I was here. These rooms share the washroom but, alas, no locks yet again.”

The door cracked and Will peeked out at him, just the barest glimpse of one large blue eye and arched eyebrow. “Have you any idea what’s going on? Why is our clothing here?”

“I have my suspicions,” Hannibal said. “Suffice it to say, I am relieved we’ll not have to travel home early due to our incident.”

The door closed in his face without comment from Will, followed by the soft squeak of the taps which brought an unspoken but thorough stop to any mention of what had just happened.

Hannibal grinned, feeling pleased, all things considered, and not entirely annoyed to think his grandfather was playing matchmaker again.

In a short time, Will was done and enclosed in his room to dress, and Hannibal made short work of washing up. Luckily, the lake water was not terribly foul and was easily overpowered by his Aunt’s taste for strong lye soap.

He was still dressing when he heard a soft knock at the washroom door and called entry.

Will slipped in, vastly uncomfortable but his chin at its usual stubborn angle. He was fairly well put together and dry, if not presentable.

What was more immediately noticeable, however, was the sweet-hot scent of him, thicker for his plunge into the lake and the strong lye soap. Hannibal ducked his head to mask his notice, but it played immediate havoc with his senses, a scent he could taste on his tongue when he drew in a deep breath, as if he could trap it and hold the memory of it in his lungs.

“I’m afraid I have ruined your hopes for that waistcoat. I doubt it will ever be the same again,” Will said, skirting the room to linger near the hallway door. “And my old boots seem rather shabby now, but I will have to do.”

“The clothing can easily be replaced and you look perfectly lovely,” Hannibal told him, testing the air again. “Have no fear on that count. Your new wardrobe suits you.”

Will ducked his head at the offhand compliment, but smoothed his hand down his trim belly, unable to resist touching the fine cloth. “I am glad the second set was delivered so quickly, though I do admit I am still curious how it has ended up here.”

“I suggest we ask Grandfather,” Hannibal said, tugging on his jacket. He crossed to Will in a few quick, long-legged strides and took up his hand.

“Hannibal, what—”

Hannibal moved to refasten Will’s cuffs, telling him, “It is easier when one has help.”

Will swallowed hard, but nodded. He waited until Hannibal was finished, then gingerly offered, “May I?”

Hannibal held out his hands, watching Will carefully refasten his cuffs, his movements spare and his touch gentle. His brow furrowed ever-so-slightly with concentration, as if some dire outcome weighed on the perfection of Hannibal’s cuffs.

It made Hannibal smile for some reason, seeing Will so deeply intent on something so mundane. He wondered what it would take to distract Will from his book sometime in the hopefully-near future and win that bet. Just imagining what might occur and how Will would react was enough to win a soft chuckle out of him.

Will’s blue eyes rose only briefly, long enough for him to notice Hannibal’s soft expression and ask, “Am I amusing you, Hannibal?”

“No,” he said, turning his wrist just so to allow Will a better angle. “I was merely thinking of our situation.”

Will’s brows rose in inquiry as he got to work on the other cuff.

“I have been trying for days to think of a way to have time alone with you, Will,” Hannibal said. “Had I only realized it required a boat, I would have reassessed my resources.”

“Ah, yes, the unfortunate boating option,” Will said, chuckling. “Dunking one another in a lake is an unusual way to spend time together, even by my book, but I suppose it’s a viable alternative when all else fails.”
Hannibal laughed with him, pleased his mate's strange fear of him had subsided as mysteriously as it had risen. It was a pleasure to see Will without his usual guarded tension and heartening to think he could be coaxed out of his serious, somber rigidity.

“There,” Will said, finishing his adjustments and dropping his hands to his side, remembering to compose himself. The events on the lake had affected him perhaps more than he realized, and it was all too easy to imagine Hannibal could always be the teasing, charming man he seemed.

The truth, however, would not sustain even so fleeting a fantasy. As his book had warned him, it was folly to believe in promises that had no grounding in truth or reason, no matter how he might wish otherwise.

“Hannibal...” he said, hesitating as he gathered his thoughts. “You really needn’t trouble yourself to seek my company. I appreciate the lengths you are willing to go in order to please your grandfather, but really all we must do is wait.”

“Wait?” Hannibal asked, somewhat flattened to recall Will so easily telling him, ‘I have no interest in you...’

“Yes,” Will said, clearing his throat. “I realize it is not spoken of in polite company, but the truth of the matter is Miss Bloom is advancing in her pregnancy. Should she give you a boy, your grandfather will hardly complain.”

Hannibal blinked, watching the way Will held himself with such still, practiced composure. His defense, Hannibal knew. The studied retreat of someone who had learned to expect unpleasantness in response to his very presence.

“You behave as if the outcome doesn’t affect you,” Hannibal murmured, seeing the minute twitch of Will’s eyebrows as he fought a frown. “Is it preferable to you, Will, that Alana gives me an heir rather than provide one yourself?”

Will gazed up at him, his blue eyes hard but thoughtful.

“When you offered to give me a child, I humiliated you, deliberately and cruelly,” Hannibal said, and Will almost flinched.

“I have no right to ask your forgiveness—”

“You wouldn’t get it,” Will said, abruptly overriding him, his back stiffening. He looked away, his profile all soft curves but for the stubborn tightness of his mouth. “It’s meaningless, Hannibal. We are nothing to one another but an inconvenience. I have done a great deal to keep your grandfather happy these past years, but I will not do that.”

He fixed Hannibal with his half-lidded, weighty blue gaze before he added, “I have nothing to offer you, nor you to offer me.”

“I disagree,” Hannibal, as serious now as Will was.

Will’s slight scowl dropped to surprise, taken aback as he always was when Hannibal managed to avoid his expectations.

“I think you have quite a lot to offer me, Will,” he said. “And I have far more to offer you than irritation and cruelty. I am determined to know you.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

“Then I will waste it,” Hannibal shot back, pleased by the way Will’s eyes narrowed with calculation, summing his intent against known variables. “I have never minded spending time or money on something when it is worth it.”

Will shifted, brow furrowing, and turned away from him towards the door, troubled and thoughtful.

“I hope Grandfather will not be too annoyed with us,” Hannibal said, deliberately changing the subject. He opened the door and waited for Will to pass through before joining him in the hallway. “Though I highly doubt he could be annoyed with you, considering you are the grandson of his dear and precious friend.”

Will cut a look up at him, still mulling over what Hannibal had said.

“If you are really so determined to find out about them, couldn’t you ask while we’re here?” He inquired, willing to let the matter drop. “Perhaps Aunt Margaret might be amenable to divulging what she knows. Uncle Robert seemed privy to a great deal.”

“I may just yet,” Hannibal told him, striding swiftly towards the stairs at Will’s side. “If you chance to speak with Uncle Robert—”

They were interrupted by Bedelia, her voice raised to reach them on the landing, “Hannibal, Grandfather wishes to see you.”

“Lecture me, more like,” Hannibal said, he and Will descending the stairs in tandem. “You always have had a predilection for euphemism, Bedelia.”
“And you a predilection for chaos,” she said, reaching out to take Will’s arm as he reached the foot of the stairs. “Would you walk with me, Will? Please don’t keep Grandfather waiting, Hannibal.”

Hannibal lingered, hesitating, but then reluctantly left his spouse in the care of his cousin to answer his grandfather’s summons.

Grandfather was still in the thick of things when Hannibal finally located him and promptly wheeled his chair towards Hannibal, frank disapproval on his face.

“Bedelia has informed me the two of you got into a situation,” he said without preamble, wheeling past Hannibal so that he was forced to turn and follow his grandfather back inside Fernhill, footmen anxiously jumping to clear a path and open doors for them.

“Still a tale-bearer at her age! Honestly! Will was growing nervous,” Hannibal said. “I thought some time on the quiet of the lake would soothe him.”

“You just conveniently forgot the boat, did you?” Grandfather asked, one brow arching. “What on earth do you think people would say had they seen the two of you? Hm?”

“I didn’t conveniently forget anything,” Hannibal said, scowling at him. “Nor did you, it would seem! Or was it simply by happenstance our clothing found its way here to Fernhill?”

Roland frowned but owned it all the same, telling him, “If I must take extreme measures to bring the two of you together, I will do so! Leaving you stranded at Fernhill overnight is not precisely dastardly. Half of the party is spending the evening and your Aunt very graciously agreed to extend her hospitality to you. I thought it would be a good opportunity for Will to take time away from Hartford House!”

“Grandfather,” Hannibal sighed, rubbing his forehead. “You needn’t exert yourself. Will and I are... managing.”

“Managing,” Grandfather echoed, and huffed softly. “I highly doubt that! I have been watching you both very carefully today, not always personally, but by whatever method I could. From what I could tell, the only thing making Will nervous was you, Hannibal.”

“Me?” Hannibal asked, Will’s strange fear of him coming to mind.

“Yes, you!”

Hannibal was glad they were alone where he wasn’t forced to be so terribly formal. He crossed his arms over his chest and braced for a show of his grandfather’s rare, true temper.

“You affect him with your moods because you’re his Alpha,” Roland said, a disapproving frown on his mouth. He turned his chair around to face Hannibal and stopped there, staring up at him with unwavering amber eyes.

Hannibal snorted a bit and said, “Not in the traditional sense, Grandfather.”

“So. You will deny it, then,” Roland said, his gaze fierce enough to put Hannibal on the defensive. “Hannibal, I am going to warn you only once, that Addendum will be filled. I will have that child. I will not, however, allow you to leave Will in pieces behind you yet again. Do whatever you must in the bounds of his consent to fill your end of our little bargain, but do not charm him into loving you unless you intend to remain at Hartford House with us and be the man I so hoped you would be.”

Hannibal stayed silent, two distinctly separate futures before him, all hinging on the hopes of the Omega he had used so badly six years before.

“Will deserves some little happiness,” Roland said, his stare stark and grim. “If not with you, then with someone of his choosing. Do not ruin him for someone else, Hannibal. He is so much better than what you would make of him.”

“I have no intentions of charming Will into loving me, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, the words wooden and uncomfortable, some small window inside of him shuttering itself at the reminder of what he was asking from Will. A child, all for the sake of getting Hartford House back into his control and out of Will’s. “It’s a sentiment neither one of us is much acquainted with. I will try my hardest to leave Will better off this time than I did before.”

“So, you will leave then?” Roland asked, a faint tremor moving through him. Pain, perhaps. Disappointment, most definitely. “Your talk of taking him to the Capital during the Season, your sudden fascination with him, all of these plans of yours I’ve been hearing of?”
Hannibal looked aside, uneasy and caught out. He summoned a smile but it was tight and didn’t fit well, tied as it was to the memory of Will’s laughter and soft, gentle touch.

“I got carried away,” he said, wishing he meant it, thoroughly chastened to be reminded of the Addendum and how easily he’d put it from his mind. “Will would never wish to leave Hartford House in my company. Why should he? What could he possibly expect?”

Another teacup shattered? Another scar on the inside?

One more scar, perhaps, than a soul could reasonably be expected to take.

Grandfather said nothing. He turned his chair slightly and moved around Hannibal, who could do nothing more than watch him go, all the while a deep and searing regret moving through him.

Regret which had a somber frown and sparkling blue eyes that slowly turned away from him.

Bedelia pulled Will at a sedate pace deeper into Fernhill’s sprawling ground floor level.

A servant jumped to open the door for them, admitting them into the rear portion of the conservatory. The lush scent of green growth filled Will’s lungs with humid air. The dappled screen of fading sunlight filtered through the verdant growth, teasing along the shimmering water of the ornamental pond within.

After a long, comfortable silence, Bedelia said with weighty consideration, “You confound my cousin, Will.”

The soft Alpha scent of her skin teased around him, a soothing balm that put him at ease and numbed some of his concern about her perception of him.

“I do not do so deliberately,” Will said, and added with a wry smile, “Though if I knew how, I would.”

She chuckled, strolling with him along the path between the carefully-tended plants. She did not press him for conversation, but Will could feel her attention focused on him, reading the subtle cues of his posture and tension in ways only an Alpha could.

“It is so beautiful here,” he said, smiling at a pair of swallows that had found their way into the vast paradise of Fernhill’s conservatory.

“I thought perhaps you might like it,” Bedelia said, her smile slight but genuine. “But I wanted to show you something else you might be interested in.”

Will nodded, willing to let her take the lead. They moved through the conservatory and back into the house proper to the opposite wing. He took his opportunity to look around Fernhill as they walked. He found it quite lovely and suitably grand, if not as updated as Hartford House itself.

He was so busy trying to take everything in he almost did not notice when she pulled him into a gallery. It only took him a heartbeat, however, to realize they were strolling among a collection of family portraits.

She did not stop until they reached a tall portrait that seemed strangely large compared the rest. Will searched it, finding a man who looked very much like Hannibal gazing out at the world with amber eyes full of mirth and a slight smirk beneath his heavy mustache.

“This portrait used to hang in Hartford House,” Bedelia said, dropping his arm to lay her hand on the frame. “Perhaps you recognize the place it once held?”

“Yes,” Will said, a strange, sinking feeling in his stomach as he reckoned the cause. “It sits empty, conspicuously so.”

“Hannibal is not the only Lecter to be possessed of a temper, Will,” Bedelia said, her even tone softening her words. “I remember the day it was brought here to Fernhill. I could not understand then the explanation given to me, but as I grew up, I began to.”

Will searched her face, seeing the slight vagueness in her blue eyes, sensing the melancholy in her voice despite her unwavering cadence.

“Shortly after Hannibal was born, my Aunt passed away. My Uncle Cyrus, Hannibal’s father, delivered my cousin into my mother’s keeping while he removed to the Continent,” she sighed, transferring her gaze to Will’s own. He could feel the sorrow pooling there, and reached out without thinking to take her hand in his, relieved when she smiled. “Mother said it was the grief that drove him to do it, but when Grandfather called him home, he did not return alone.”
She cut another look up at the portrait, assessing and full of rebuke. “He and Grandfather fought like beasts, year in and year out over the woman he brought home with him. Unsuitable. Disreputable. Notorious.” She smiled again, wry and weary, and added, “You see, Uncle Cyrus returned with a famous opera singer, a woman of powerful opinions and vast beauty who was, Grandfather feared, more in love with the Lecter titles and fortune than with his son. He forbid them from marrying, so... they merely lived together to spite him.”

Will blanched, the scene playing out in his imagination, a vicious row that must have frightened everyone for miles. It called to mind the argument that had followed his arrival at Hartford House, his only experience to reference remotely like the fight she spoke of.

“The Lecter men are also possessed of a rather grand impression of their own opinions,” Bedelia said, chuckling softly, a purring sound filled with bitterness and sorrow. “So when Uncle Cyrus announced his attachment, Grandfather announced Hannibal was to be his heir, cutting Cyrus out entirely.”

Will pondered it, considering the familiar face in the portrait that seemed to hold such mischievous good humor, yet did not quite cover the turmoil within.

“Rather than discuss it, they clashed like rams, battering their heads against one another in a vain attempt to force sense where passion ruled,” he murmured, saddened. “What terrible hurt it must have caused to sway Grandfather to take such actions, sending this portrait here in disgrace.”

“It was terrible hurt and terrible anger,” Bedelia agreed. “It took years to mend the damage, but the breach was never fully filled. Cyrus was never reinstated to be heir, and all our hopes rested on Hannibal, who never spent a moment of his youth without feeling that weight like a stone around his neck.”

Will somberly met her gaze and nodded, offering, “I understand he has a heavy burden to bear, Bedelia. I have no desire to add to his troubles.”

“It is not the burden you might add that I wish to convey to you, Will, should you even manage to add an ounce,” she said, her voice as firm and direct as her gaze.

“Insight,” he said. “He is his father’s son.”

“Yes,” she said, satisfied. “I see fire in you, Will.”

Heat stained his cheeks but he did not drop his gaze.

“It has been tamped down and smothered in ash, but it is there nonetheless,” she said, pleased with him. “He will needle and prod and provoke you to find it, because he knows it is there. These Lecter men,” she cast another glance up at Hannibal’s father, “they are passionate men, men who are righteous in the stands they take and roused to fury when they are challenged, but one thing they cannot resist, one thing they are weak for above all other things, is something which does not yield.”

Will looked away, overly warm of a sudden, understanding her purpose in all this.

“You confound my cousin,” she said again, and brushed his curls back behind his ear, giving one a playful, slight tug to get his attention. “I would say, regardless of your intentions, you have managed to secure his interest. Whatever you do with it is entirely up to you.”

“And do you think I am up to the task of managing a Lecter Alpha?” Will asked, steadying his voice in a way his nerves refused to concede to.

Bedelia’s smile was wide and true when she said, “I have never believed anything more in my life, Will Graham.”

Will blushed, flustered but strangely flattered. He did not fool himself into believing he could sway Hannibal one way or another, but perhaps, just perhaps, like Scheherazade he might be able to keep himself alive.

He took another look at Cyrus Lecter, stubborn and proud but somehow still vulnerable, his grief a wound that would not heal and drove him to desperation.

“He lost so much,” Will said, feeling a strange kinship with this man who would have been his father through Hannibal. “His wife, his inheritance, his father’s good regard. It must have been difficult for him. It must have been difficult for Hannibal to lose him.”

“No one has ever told you of that night, have they?” Bedelia asked, her somber thoughtfulness returning. “Grandfather has kept you insulated from what ugliness he could manage, a beautiful bird in the cage he constructed of Hartford House.”

Will was startled into looking at her again, questions in his eyes.
“There was a terrible accident,” Bedelia murmured, clasping Will’s hand in both of hers, her fingers strong but chilled. “Grandfather and Uncle argued. It was spring, and the storms were unrelenting. The river had risen even to the bridge, but for reasons I to this day do not know, Cyrus attempted to leave. Their carriage overturned into the river in the darkness. Cyrus, his concubine, and their daughter, Mischa, all died. Hannibal was the only one to survive.”

Will winced, trembling, his vivid imagination painting a terrifying portrait of what had happened to them. The roar of water was loud in his ears, so real he could feel it eddying around him, trapping him in suffocating darkness while the horses screamed in terror.

“He walked for miles through the woods in a raging storm to reach Fernhill,” Bedelia said, so soft and faint Will could barely hear her over his Gift. “I will never forget that night as long as I live. Hannibal was never the same after losing them... after losing little Mischa.”

Will blinked hard, fending off the pain that reached him when his imagination showed him Hannibal as a child, fighting his way through storm-ravaged forest for help that would always be too late.

“He was never the same,” she breathed again, turning her glittering eyes to Will. “To this day, my father will not speak of what he saw when they pulled them from the river. I was not entirely sure Grandfather would survive it.”

Will shuddered, grimacing against the onslaught of so much pain and terror for one family to deal with all at once. For one child to deal with all at once.

“There is a certain kind of fortitude that comes from enduring terrible trauma. It leaves the survivor... unpredictable,” Bedelia whispered, and Will flinched, turning away, too vulnerable in that moment with his empathy unbound, unable to defend against her.

“You are unpredictable, Will Graham,” she said, and lay her hand against his cheek to calm him. “You have that in common with Hannibal.”

“Bedelia,” Will said, taking a breath that ached in his lungs, as if water poured out with every pulse of his words. “Hannibal’s stepmother, was she—”

“Here you both are! Come along, come along, darlings!” Aunt Margaret called down the gallery at them, tapping her cane with imperious impatience.

Will started, the remnants of his perception shredded by the interruption. He closed his eyes, grateful for Bedelia’s cool hand against his flushed cheek.

“Yes, Aunt Margaret,” Bedelia said, looping her arm through Will’s again with a small, conspiratorial smile. “We wouldn’t dream of inconveniencing Cousin Atticus, would we, Will?”

Will swallowed his question down, but it lingered in the back of his mind, gone yet certainly not forgotten.

Hannibal watched from the garden proper as the sun began to set and Fernhill servants moved about lighting paper lanterns all throughout the pathways and lake shore. He was reluctant to rejoin the party with so many heavy thoughts weighing on him and used the growing darkness to his advantage on that count. His grandfather’s pointed questions regarding his intentions towards Will still occupied his thoughts and left him reflective.

He’d lost sight of his goal. Rather, he’d lost sight of the ugly method he’d agreed to in order to get Hartford House back. The plans Grandfather had spoken of had been made with no thought to that Addendum and had been, he knew, entirely selfish on his part.

But he’d signed his name. He’d agreed, and that said more about his character than he honestly wanted to face.

It was easy for him to imagine a life at Hartford House, settling into domesticity with Will, fathering his children and keeping him company until time stole everything from both of them. He could ask Grandfather to destroy the Addendum, pretend it had never existed, and have that life yet.
But he had no right no ask that of Will, not now. He’d forfeited his right when he’d walked away six years ago and left his husband behind him without a backwards glance. There was no future to be had, only filling the Addendum and finding some way to give back to Will what he’d unknowingly taken from him.

“It’s rather unusual to find you alone at a party, Hannibal,” Bedelia said, the gentle waft of her feminine scent reaching his nose before the soft purr of her voice disturbed his unhappy thoughts. She came to settle against the balustrade next to him, her blue eyes taking in the beauty of Fernhill’s gardens by gentle lamplight. “Did grandfather scold you?”

“No, he settled for being disappointed,” Hannibal said, smiling when she smirked. “Which we both know is so much worse.”

“Indeed,” she said, taking a dainty sip of her drink. “Will Graham is an interesting Omega, Hannibal.”
Hannibal looked over at her, searching her profile for some clue to her thoughts.

“I had not expected to find a bond,” she said, tipping her head to look back at him. “I suspected... something when I first met him, but not that.”

“Bonding? Nonsense,” Hannibal said, knowing there was nothing like. “Grandfather mentioned such a thing and I have no idea why. Entirely nonsense. Bedelia, you know how degrading I find the subject of bonding.”

“If you are so dismissive of it then why did you form one with Will in the first place?” she asked, genuinely curious.
Hannibal glared at her, certain he’d misheard.

“You did bond with Will,” she pressed, surprise erasing her unearthly calm for only a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was measured and cautious but full of deadly curiosity. “Hannibal, Will Graham is a bonded Omega. If it isn’t with you, then with whom?”

Hannibal felt a flush of terrible anger and jealousy bubble up through him with such force that Bedelia tensed in response. He looked back to where Grandfather was situated and saw Will at his side once more. Bonded.

It didn’t make any bit of sense, not after Will’s flustered response to him on the lake. He’d been flushed and alarmed, as open and innocent as any virginal maiden Hannibal had ever met in his day.

Or perhaps it had simply been the embarrassed denials of an Omega already spoken for. An Omega whose relationship was forced into secrecy for the sake of appearances. Perhaps Will’s assurance he found the idea of sharing a bed with him boring was simply the only way he could think of to put off an Alpha who would know in a heartbeat he was already bonded and taken.

“Hannibal?”
He strained to recall the sight of Will’s throat when he’d burst in on him in the bath, but he’d been too entranced by the overall picture to notice such details and felt foolish for having been taken in so easily.
Ashamed and feeling strangely hurt, he said, “You can’t possibly know that—”

“I can, actually,” Bedelia murmured, calming and taking another slow, calculated sip of her drink. “There are certain... instincts triggered in unbonded Alphas by an unbonded Omega his age, Hannibal. You can’t have gone so long in the world without realizing.”

“I feel no such things towards any Omegas,” Hannibal said, turning his nose up at even the idea of it. “Instincts are merely convenient excuses to indulge one’s carnality.”

Bedelia’s pale brows rose over her blue eyes. “I see.”

“Do you?” Hannibal demanded. “Because here you stand, trying to tell me Will has gone and bound himself to some unknown Alpha on the basis of a tingle in your pinky finger!”

“It’s rather more complicated than all that,” she said, amused by his bluster. “I do find it interesting, however, that you have not noticed or responded to the unbonded Omegas you have met since you’ve been married to Will Graham.”

“That is not interesting in the least,” Hannibal said, glaring Will’s direction.
There was a tentative smile on his full mouth, shy and diffident as Grandfather introduced him to more party guests eager to meet him. Will tipped his head up and his smile widened to a grin, slightly crooked and endearing. The thought that some unknown Alpha had seen this same smile, had succeeded where Hannibal had failed, was almost too much for him. He wanted nothing more than to walk over to Will, to demand a confession out of him and find out who had dared to—
“Hannibal, stop,” Bedelia said, almost a sigh but with such pressure on her syllables he turned his attention back to her. She blinked once, languidly, and said, “If you continue to scowl at him, everything Grandfather has worked for today will be lost.”

He chafed to do just what he imagined but his better sense won out, though he subsided with prickling irritation.

“Honestly,” Bedelia said, the word weary with resignation. “You are no better than a child at times.”

She put her cup down, daintily brushing her fingers down her dress to make it fall just so. Without giving him the benefit of eye contact, she said, “When you are sensible and reasonable enough to realize you need help, Hannibal, please come and see me.”

“That will be a long wait, Bedelia,” he said, catching sight of Grandfather’s slight gesture he was to join them.

“Actually, I don’t think it will,” she said, offering him a smile that held a world’s worth of secretive satisfaction.

Once Bedelia swept off from his sight, Hannibal managed to calm significantly. He wondered if Will, hearing of his exploits in the Capital, hearing news of his daughter’s birth, had felt even a fraction of the dismayed disappointment Hannibal felt in this moment. He honestly hoped not, because he didn’t like this feeling one little bit and wished to be free of it immediately.

He had no high ground—moral or otherwise—from which to judge Will. As Will had pointed out, six years ago he had been willing to try to make their marriage work, despite how hateful Hannibal had been to him. Like a sacrificial lamb, he’d offered himself on the altar of Hannibal’s understanding and been soundly rejected, brutally so. Having abandoned him to silence and isolation in the country for six years, Hannibal could understand what would have driven Will to seek the comfort of a bond, but that didn’t make him any happier about it. A short time ago it had seemed a viable option to be rid of him, but now it left Hannibal with a belly full of burning anger and the irony of it stung.

He could not, however, put it entirely past his cousin to be having him on just to rile him and see what he would do. Hannibal refused to give her the satisfaction, were that the case, and knew Will deserved an opportunity to speak of it in private.

Determined to handle things gracefully, Hannibal returned to Will’s side. He was relieved to see his spouse was much more at ease now, though deep in thought.

“Did you enjoy your tour of Fernhill?” he asked in the brief lull they had before everyone realized he had returned.

“I did, thank you,” Will said, Hannibal’s unusual calm soothing him. He was still somewhat adrift after the story Bedelia had told him, aching for the child Hannibal had once been. Hoping to make conversation that would ground him somewhat, he said, “It’s very beautiful here, though I admit I find Hartford House more comfortable and lovely.”

“You have worked extremely hard to make Hartford House what it is,” Hannibal said, trying to find a gentle way to broach the subject without stepping wrong again. “Your years of diligent service show.”

Will frowned and angled a glance his way in the relative darkness.

“The lights are beautiful, aren’t they?” Hannibal asked. “Would you care to walk around the lake again? Things seen by the light of day change in darkness, revealing themselves for what they truly are.”

“Why are you suddenly so agreeable?”

“I am always agreeable,” Hannibal countered, fairly caught out.

“Liar.”

Hannibal’s rebuke died on his lips when he faced his spouse and found him smiling slightly, a genuine smile half unseen in the deepening dusk. Before he could recover sufficiently to continue their conversation, Uncle Robert included Will in a booming recitation of his favorite poetry by taking his hand up to deliver some of the more florid lines in Will’s honor. Hannibal wasn’t entirely certain Uncle Robert hadn’t been at the port unnoticed.

Luckily for them all, the dinner gong rang out. Organized chaos ensued as people found their dinner dates and made their way to the huge spread laid out for them.

“I am sorry to interrupt you, Uncle Robert, but we’re being herded to dinner,” Hannibal said by way of excuse, smiling to see him take a bewildered glance at his surroundings.
“Ah! I must nab your Aunt Grace before she takes some young man in my place!” Uncle Robert said, and reclaimed the hand Hannibal had just freed to grace it with a quick kiss. “You are a delight! Just a sheer delight! Remind me after dinner to show you my collection of maps, Will!”

“Yes, yes, Uncle Robert, he is all atwitter at the idea,” Hannibal said, shaking his head as his uncle barreled off in search of his aunt. “Goodness, he’s exhausting.”

“He is clever and well spoken,” Will said, smiling after him. “And quite passionate in his speaking.”

“He is rather hard of hearing.”

He fully intended to escort Will to an empty corner and speak privately with him about his bonded status which, as Will’s mate, was his gods-given and lawful right. He could not ignore it; neither one of them could. If Will was bonded, then that Alpha had a claim on him which superseded their mutual grandfathers’ contract and that was a family issue.

“Will,” he said, steering him away towards a likely-looking space as everyone sorted themselves to go in. “There is something I wish to speak to you of—”

“Hannibal! There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you!”

Hannibal felt Will freeze next to him just as he did, both of them bracing for an oncoming storm.

“Thomas,” Hannibal said, flummoxed to find his mistress’s closest friend and supporter bearing down on him with a flushed grin and a glass of watered wine in one hand. “When did you arrive?”

“Hours ago! Bedelia just informed me you were here! I can’t believe you actually came!” he said, not even glancing at Will. “Alana said you were back. She’s very excited to finally see the old homestead, simply wouldn’t stop talking about the move! How soon will you be fetching them to Hartford House, eh?”

“That was a private discussion,” Hannibal said, hoping to hush him, and looked anxiously at Will.

He had hoped and prayed to escape the Garden Party unscathed, but Hannibal Lecter, war veteran, doctor, and future Duke, was nearly laid waste by one look from his composed, newly-reclaimed spouse.

Will’s blue eyes had darkened to near brown beneath his shuttered lashes, his face expressionless, retreating into reserved stillness at Hannibal’s side as if he imagined himself invisible. It was profoundly disturbing to see him so... absent.

“Oh, no, old boy, don’t try fooling me,” Thomas said, laughing loudly enough to make Hannibal wince. “She’s told me all about it! She can’t wait for you to send for her and little Marissa! Galley Field is so far away from everything, isn’t it? She’s bereft of good company! Why, I just saw her last week and she was telling me about your situation.”

“That was not very well done of her,” Hannibal said, searching for a way to disengage from Will and drag Thomas off someplace to set him straight. “As I have said, no plans have been settled.”

“What’s left to settle? Once that awful person is out of Hartford House, you’re free to bring your family home where they belong, isn’t that right?” he gave Hannibal an expectant look and, when Hannibal merely stared at him in awe of his idiocy, he dared to turn that look on Will and ask, “That does sound fairly settled, does it not?”

Hannibal wanted desperately to pick Will up as he had before, just snatch him up and walk away no matter what anyone said about it. Anything, anything, really, to make up for this awful, unexpected shock.

“Yes, it does,” Will said, his slight smile resigned but still a million miles away, seeking safety in a place far from such unhappy and upsetting circumstances. “Allow me to assure you, sir, that I have no intentions of sharing Hartford House with Miss Bloom or any one of Hannibal’s mistresses.”

Those blue eyes lifted to Hannibal’s, hard and bright and deadly.

“And considering the unique circumstances regarding Hartford House, I suppose the outcome is not quite as settled as my husband would hope,” he purred. “If you will excuse me, gentlemen.”

“Will—” Hannibal attempted to catch hold of him but Will deftly eluded him, cutting through the loose crowd with grim determination. “Damn you, sir, are you completely out of your mind?”

Thomas looked as if he’d swallowed a lemon, peel and all.

“Oh, my! I am so sorry,” he managed, reaching out to lay his hand on Hannibal’s arm as he strained to see over the hats, hairstyles, and heads of other guests to find which way Will had gone. “I had no idea he was here! You should have warned me!”
“My expression alone should have warned you!” Hannibal scolded, shooing his hand off of him. “Honestly, Thomas, prattling on about private matters!”

“Hannibal, you have never made a secret of your affection for Alana,” Thomas protested, an irritated wrinkle appearing between his eyes. “Nor have you made any secret of your contempt for your spouse, though now that I’ve seen him I can’t imagine why you’d complain.”

“Oh, shut up, will you?” Hannibal asked, completely out of patience. “And stop going on about my affairs, thank you very much! If Alana has spoken of moving to Hartford House, then I know damned good and well she also spoke of it not having been settled yet! Now excuse me while I attempt to put a tourniquet to the hemorrhage you’ve caused!”

Flummoxed, Thomas said nothing and became quite speechless with embarrassment, which gave Hannibal the time he needed to brush past him with an annoyed huff and go in search of his little spouse.

He spied Bedelia and crossed the darkening lawn to reach her, asking, “Has Will passed this way?”

“I believe he is attempting to catch Grandfather’s coach,” Bedelia told him, concern pinching her fine features. “Honestly, what have you managed to do now? He was extremely disturbed.”

“It was merely a misunderstanding,” Hannibal said, casting around. He wrinkled his nose at her and added, “A misunderstanding that would not have occurred had you not invited a ridiculous person like Thomas Marlow to your gathering!”

“Thomas Marlow is Anthony’s friend as well as yours,” Bedelia said, unruffled by his turning on her. “He has come every year since he was a child, Hannibal. You cannot possibly have forgotten that.”

“And what of Will’s sister, Lady Rathmore?” Hannibal asked, wondering where she had gone off to. “Hm? Did you think it might be uncomfortable for him to see her? She upset him, you know, filling his head with ugly gossip, no doubt.”

Bedelia made no move to contain her amusement at how flustered and unhappy he was. She took a languid sip of her drink and murmured, “I have never invited Lady Rathmore anywhere, Hannibal. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Oh, no you don’t!” Hannibal warned. “You said Grandfather is leaving?”

“Grandfather has left,” she corrected, smirking when he cursed. “He had hoped the two of you would pass the night here, but I believe your spouse is, as we speak, attempting to catch up to him. You should have more care, Hannibal, for those with whom you play. Not every doll is as bereft of a heart as it pretends to be.”

He glowered after her but she ignored him, making a big show of casting her attention onto her current paramour.

Hannibal turned onto the path that led back towards the drive, threading his way through the party-goers heading in to dinner. He reached the front of Fernhill and asked the nearest servant, “Have you seen a rather slender young man with curly brown hair?”

“He went after His Grace’s coach, m’Lord.”

“Have one of the Dimmond coaches readied,” Hannibal ordered. “No, wait, bother that. Saddle a horse for me.”

“M’Lord, I—”

“Just do it, for the gods’ sake!” Hannibal snapped. “Or do you not recognize the family resemblance?”

The man rushed off to carry out his orders and in a short time a rather sleepy-looking horse was brought around, clearly not one of the Dimmond prizes, by any means. Hannibal mounted and waited impatiently for his stirrups to be adjusted, nudging the horse into a canter and hoping to overtake Will on the way.

“**zzz**

“You are very quiet,” Roland said, a faceless and formless voice in the darkness of the coach, but his concern was touching. He had not remarked on how Will had chased the coach down, nor asked him to explain his insistence to return home while the party was still in full swing, and for that Will was profoundly grateful.

“I am tired,” Will softly said, glad the darkness could hide so much. He knew Grandfather could sense his distress but he was thoughtful enough not to call attention to it. He looked out at the shadowy treeline passing beyond the windows, his thoughts tangled and taut. Pride urged him to go back with his chin up but he was unable to do so. How could he go back there, where Hannibal’s close acquaintances were in attendance, waiting to unwittingly insult him? He could hardly blame them; they knew only what Hannibal had mentioned to them.
‘Once that awful person is out of Hartford House, you’re free to bring them home where they belong, isn’t that right?’

Will shuddered, almost as angry as he was hurt, but he wasn’t surprised. It was not a shock to him that Hannibal had spoken badly of him when he’d had the occasion to speak of him at all. Rather, it was mortifying to imagine he’d been the subject of ugly conversation, not only between Hannibal and his mistress but with his friends as well.

It wasn’t fair, but—as he firmly reminded himself—fair was a child’s word and he was no child.

“Will,” Roland said, somber and thoughtful. “I have watched you grow increasingly more unsettled here at Hartford House. If you truly wish to do so, then you have my permission to go to Marsham Heath after the small gathering I’ve arranged, but only for a fortnight.”

“A fortnight will hardly be long enough to suit Hannibal or me,” Will said, sinking back into his seat to hide the sheen of angry tears in his eyes, Hannibal’s teasing grin flashing in his mind’s eye with the whispered promise of that ridiculous bet. “A permanent move—”

“You are as much my grandchild as he is and I want you near me, especially now,” Grandfather said, his tone firming. “A fortnight and no more. Jimmy must be at your side at all times, I insist on it for safety. Perhaps after such a time there will be peace enough between you to manage an heir.”

Then it is settled,” Will said, closing his eyes and leaning his head back, unutterably weary and strangely hurt to think Mina had been right after all.

If Hannibal was trying to get close to him it was only to do him harm, and Will’s only sure defense was to give Hannibal what he most wanted—his absence.

He would leave Hartford House the moment Grandfather’s party was over and that was that.

Chapter 15

Hannibal wound up riding the reluctant Dimmond nag all the way back to Hartford House, having long ago left behind the possibility Will had missed catching the ducal coach and been left stranded. Indeed, upon his arrival, Mr. Hawkes informed him Will had already gone upstairs to bed.

Hannibal grimly strode up the stairs and down the hallway to Will’s suite, rapping sharply on the door only once before twisting the knob and letting himself in.

Will’s blue eyes flashed with annoyance as he slid from his bed and turned his back, still attempting to pull on a robe to cover his nightclothes, his book tumbling from his lap to the floor.

“Is there some emergency, Lord Clarges?” he asked, head dipping as he belted his robe, giving Hannibal a decidedly pleasant view of his narrow waist and straight shoulders. “Or are you mistaking rooms once more?”

“You worried me, taking off in such a manner,” Hannibal told him, standing in the doorway, momentarily forgetting why he was here and wondering if he was, in fact, getting soft in the head. The memory of Will’s slender body pressed to his returned with frightening clarity, enough so to temporarily distract him from his purpose.

“It was not my intention to worry you,” Will said, turning to face him with his arms crossed over his chest and his chin tipped up in defiance.

“Merely to escape me?” Hannibal queried, his eyes falling to Will’s slender throat, searching for signs of a mark.

Will nervously reached up and pinched the top of his robe closed in his fist, hoping to cover himself enough to lose Hannibal’s sudden and unwelcome interest.

“Merely to relieve you,” Will corrected. “And while we are on the subject, my plans are settled to leave Hartford House after your grandfather’s party.”

“You will do nothing of the sort!” Hannibal announced, shocked into blurting out the first thing he could think of to put a stop to it. “I forbid it!”

“You forbid it?” Will echoed, and laughed. “And how do you propose to stop me, Lord Clarges?”
“It would be entirely foolish to tell you,” Hannibal hedged, having no idea. Usually, the threat of his authority was enough to force obedience but he wasn’t surprised his authority carried no weight with his increasingly angry little spouse. Will had no use for, or patience with, such nonsense and Hannibal well knew it.

Will smiled at his attempt to cow him, cocking his head slightly to one side, knowing he hadn’t the faintest clue.

“Stop being so smug, damn you!” Hannibal said, annoyed. “You are my spouse, Will, and Hartford House is your home! You will remain here where you belong!”

“No,” Will said, the single word heavy with anger despite how softly he spoke it. “I will not. I do not require your permission for anything, if you will recall.”

Hannibal stared at him in consternation, rankled that Will could so easily dismiss him. After a long, silent moment, he managed to ask, “And where will you go? To Marsham Heath, is it?”

“That is none of your business,” Will said, glowering at him.

“To the contrary, it is entirely my business,” Hannibal said, wondering with suspicion if he had plans instead to flee to the Alpha he was bound to. Surely, surely they were furious, whoever they were, to have their Omega sharing space with another Alpha. Hannibal would certainly never stand for it. “Or is there something you have neglected to tell me about, hm?”

Surprised, Will asked, “What on earth are you talking about, Hannibal?”

“I’m talking about the fact that I know you are bonded,” Hannibal said, deciding to play Bedelia’s card.

Will drew in a shocked breath, blanking at his announcement. Pure, unadulterated fear gripped him then, because if Hannibal knew, if he even suspected Will had formed a bond to him, then he would have absolute control and Will was far too smart to dream he would be careful with him when there was every possibility Hannibal wanted him dead.

Hannibal felt his anxiety like a throbbing punch in his gut and he snarled softly, demanding, “Who is it?”

Will’s relief was so keen he almost laughed, but Hannibal’s anger was palpable, frightening in its intensity, and it quickly chased away everything but dread that rapidly escalated to pure fury when Hannibal asked, “Anthony, perhaps?”

“How dare you!” Will snarled, forgetting to hold tight to his robe, forgetting he had a secret to protect, forgetting this man had in all likelihood attempted to kill him once already. All of it was flung onto the fire of his anger with the Alpha before him.

“Casting aspersions on others and keeping none for yourself! How dare you say that to me!”

Hannibal pushed away from the door and took a step towards him only to immediately chastise himself for forgetting Will’s penchant for violence. He was prevented from taking another step by his furious little mate proving he was, in fact, quite capable of brandishing a rather heavy marquetry table before him in dire warning for Hannibal to keep his distance.

“There is no one bound to me,” Will hissed, and quite honestly so, because his bond only went one way, chaining him to the man before him while leaving Hannibal quite free.

“Why should I believe you?” Hannibal asked, his tone nasty, all of his ugly beliefs about Omegas rising up against his reason, ready and eager to believe the worst of his mate.

But by all the gods he was lovely when he was riled, Hannibal had to admit that. He looked half wild and ready to do battle, heedless of his robe gaping open over his pale skin, unknowing of the picture he made with his blue eyes shooting sparks and his red mouth parted in a snarl, a vengeful god roused to righteous retribution.

Hannibal was so distracted he almost didn’t react in time to bat the table away when Will flung it at him.

His anger died abruptly when Will sharply said to him, “You have been unfaithful to me in every imaginable capacity, Lord Clarges, but I have never once been unfaithful to you.”

Hannibal subsided, grimacing at how deep that barb went, chastened by the sight of Will standing before him in the tatters of his pride, panting with the force of his rightful fury.

“And should you ever imagine accusing me of such vile and shameful behavior,” Will said, his volume softening but not his anger, “then I assure you, Lord Clarges, I will cosh you with the heaviest piece of furniture I can lift and step over you on my way to find a lover, for I will not be charged guilty of a crime without committing it.”

It took Hannibal a long, reflective moment to finally manage, “You are profoundly unsettling, William Graham.”

“And you are remarkably self-righteous for a man with the morals and deportment of an alley cat,” Will said, trying to regain control of himself now that Hannibal’s anger had died such a quick and surprising death. “One must be careful casting stones, Hannibal, when one is king of a glass castle.”
Hannibal frowned, disliking the chastisement but accepting it. There was every chance Bedelia was wrong, or baiting him somehow, and Hannibal had no way of knowing. All he knew for certain was that Will had been honest in every exchange they’d had since the moment they met, no matter if his opinions irritated Hannibal or exposed a flaw he was ashamed to have bared.

“If you say there has been no one, then I believe you,” he said, surprising himself as much as Will with his honesty.

Will was startled into looking over at him, his blue eyes widening with shock, knowing it must have peeled an entire layer off of Hannibal’s pride to say such a thing. He felt the tug of his bond to Hannibal luring him closer, enticing him to soothe away the flustered, irritated, and vulnerable look on his husband’s handsome face.

And beneath that face lay the echo of a child fleeing the violent deaths of his family through rain-soaked, blackened woods, orphaned and bereft.

It softened Will without his intending it to, that image. That child would always be there trapped in memories of brutal horror, rushing water and loss and guilt for surviving when those he loved had not. That they had loved him in return only made it all the harder for Will to ignore it. He knew how dearly he would have suffered in Hannibal’s place, losing a family who cared about him.

Will couldn’t tell what provoked him to act. He didn’t dare try to analyze his own motives. Was it the child he hoped to soothe, or the man? Was it his Gift or Omegan weakness? It didn’t seem to matter, all that mattered was the outcome.

Will moved closer to him and reached out to take his hand.

Hannibal snatched Will’s slender fingers in his on impulse and asked, “What are you doing?”

It came out sharper than he intended with his surprise and Will retreated, attempting to free his hand from Hannibal’s fingers. He tightened his grip and tugged, asking with less force, “Is something wrong?”

“No, I just—I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have touched you like that,” Will said, flushed with growing mortification. No doubt the last thing in the world Hannibal wanted touching him was the repellent and ugly Omega he’d been forced into marriage with. “That was thoughtless of me, not to mention incredibly rude.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, somewhat exasperated that they were essentially in a tug of war over Will’s hand. He gave him another tug that half dragged Will against him and said, “Just tell me what you’re about.”

At a loss, Will lifted his trapped hand and pressed the back of Hannibal’s fingers beneath his jaw. His voice quavered with nerves when he told him, “See for yourself.”

“See what?” Hannibal asked, releasing Will’s hand to turn his fingertips to his throat. It was the first time in six years he had seen it completely bare and he lost track of his thoughts again while searching the soft, smooth skin of Will’s neck. It was more slender than he’d expected, almost delicate, and clearly unmarked, much to his relief.

Clearing his throat to chase down the tightness that threatened, he spread his hand along the side of Will’s neck and paused, forced into stillness by the thrumming beat of Will’s pulse beneath his palm. He tested his scent, the lush fragrance of fertile youth even stronger than it had been at Fernhill, but he could taste no fear, just something fragile and delicate as spun glass even the softest of touches could destroy.

“See?” Will said, forcing a lightness into his voice that sounded strained and anxious even to his own ears. “No bite marks.”

Reluctant to give up the warm contentment he felt touching Will even so little, Hannibal brought his other hand up to cup Will’s neck and keep him from retreating, saying, “I told you I believe you.”

Will flushed, feeling awkward standing as he was in his robe and nightclothes with his throat trapped in Hannibal’s large, warm hands while those sensitive fingers spread over his skin.

“Sometimes seeing is believing,” Will murmured, the pressure of Hannibal’s fingers changing softly as he spoke. The warm, earthy scent of his skin filled Will’s lungs with every breath, pricking his senses as surely as the callused fingertips trailing over his throat. The touch brought goosebumps rippling over him, and the mocking echo of his father’s voice whispered this touch was what he’d been after in the first place—a deeply desperate bid for attention after the revelations of the evening. It scalded him to think he was so weak after all, just another Omega driven by heats and instinct, pathetic in Hannibal’s eyes.

The sour despondence of his thoughts should have ruined it for him. The fact that Hannibal’s touch only comforted him made it all the worse. He nearly shuddered to feel the sure quest of fingers down the length of his throat, testing every inch of
his supple skin even into the loose collar of his robe, impulse urging him to allow Hannibal to do more, to do anything he desired.

It was terribly dangerous, this closeness. He could feel his bond to Hannibal strengthening, more threads weaving into the fabric which anchored him to his Alpha, a relentless pull dragging him closer and closer to inevitable destruction, broken on sharp stones and scattered to rough seas.

When Hannibal slid his hand beneath the fabric of his nightclothes to seek the soft skin of his shoulder, his amber eyes hazy as if caught in a dream, sudden panic drowned out everything else. The cliff of his nightmares loomed up in Will’s imagination, the promise of what awaited him should he freely indulge his impulses or should Hannibal ever discover the twisted nature of Will's bond to him. It shocked Will enough that he pulled back sharply, gasping, “What are you doing?”

“Seeing if you were bitten on your shoulder,” Hannibal said, clenching his empty hands into fists to trap the warmth and scent of Will’s flesh on his fingers, sweet and compelling.

“I was doing you a courtesy, Lord Clarges,” Will said, righting his clothing with sharp tugs, surprised Hannibal had dared to do such a thing. Then again, considering his opinions on Will’s capacity to seduce, it was likely Will could strip naked in front of him and garner no more than a raised eyebrow at his gall. “No one has bitten me anywhere, for gods’ sake! That was the point!”

“You didn’t have to go to such extremes, Will,” Hannibal said, dropping his hands to his sides, head tipping to chase the sweet elusive scent that eddied about him. “I have no cause or right to criticize you, considering my past behavior... though I am not complaining of your insistence.”

Will managed a scandalized and dangerous little growl that almost made him smile.

“Have I agitated you?” he asked. “Thank goodness there is nothing too deadly at hand with that table out of reach.”

“Would it content you to know that I am, in fact, beating you quite soundly with a trout in my imagination?” Will asked, doing a poor job of covering his throat with the lapels of his robe, his hands trembling. He retreated, an impulsive bid for safety which Hannibal, thankfully, did not deny him.

“What would content me, Will, is knowing you will not beat a hasty retreat from Hartford House without provocation,” Hannibal said, circling back around to distract himself from thinking of Will’s fragile throat.

“You feel I haven’t been provoked?” Will questioned.

“Will,” Hannibal said, uncomfortable and feeling in the wrong. “What was said tonight—”

“You owe me nothing, Lord Clarges,” Will said, mortified all over again by the memory of what had been said, of the events that had taken place at the tailor’s shop, of everything that had occurred since Hannibal’s return home. He took a deep breath and forced it all down as best he could. “Least of all an explanation. However you choose to speak of me to those who know you best is your own affair, though I expected better from you as a gentleman than to gossip openly of our marriage.”

A spasm of regret passed through Hannibal. Softly, he said, “It was wrong of me to speak of you to anyone in such a way, Will. You aren’t the only one who begged Grandfather for an annulment. Since the day I met you—”

“Since the day I met you,” Hannibal’s mouth and his fingers clenched without realizing it, a twitch of response to somehow negate the still-raw pain in his mate’s soft voice. “Since the day I met you, all I’ve wanted is to go away.”

Will’s large, glittering blue eyes lifted to his, his usual reserve abandoned to show the true pain within. His voice was a silky-soft whisper of regret when he said, “I’m as trapped in this debacle as you are.”
Hannibal swallowed hard, fighting the urge to haul Will up into his arms and soothe such ugliness from him. The thought of Hartford House and an heir were far from his mind, rendered down to petty trivialities in the face of what he had cost Will these six long years.

“Please... do not leave Hartford House,” he said, the idea of Will’s absence just wrong somehow, a shadow that would remain to haunt the halls with his presence.

“I can only say, Lord Clarges,” Will said, desperate for him to go away, “that I will at least inform you before I go, but I will be leaving.”

Hannibal sighed, rubbing his forehead with resignation, and nodded slightly at him.

“That is more courtesy than I have ever shown you,” he admitted, and showed himself out, leaving Will flushed and disturbed and quietly trembling behind him.

Hannibal returned to his own suite, somber and thoughtful in the wake of his clash with Will.

Berger bustled about the room, busy turning down the covers and lowering the lamps. He did a double take when Hannibal walked in, and said with a soft chuckle, “You look like you been put through the ringer, m’Lord.”

“I certainly feel as though I have,” Hannibal sighed, flopping down into the nearest chair with a heavy sigh. “My spouse would have made a formidable General.”

“That so, m’Lord?” Berger inquired, politely interested. “He seems a pleasant and quiet little fellow to me.”

“It’s the quiet ones you must be wary of, Berger,” Hannibal warned him. “They are far too intelligent to give themselves away with words.”

He frowned slightly, absently tapping his fingers on the chair’s arm, trying to order his thoughts. His own exasperated, proud observation of Will brought back his grandfather’s words on Omegas. It seemed weeks since their conversation in the library when Grandfather had so casually surmised there were Omegas in the military. Seeing Will in a high and righteous fury, knowing what he now knew, it did not seem so unbelievable a thought and he asked, “Did you know of any Omegas in the military, Berger?”

His valet’s hands stuttered and he flinched, answer enough in Hannibal’s book.

“Er... yes, m’Lord,” Berger admitted, coming to him when Hannibal got up and began to undress. “Quite a few as a matter of fact. Took all manner of meds to keep from being outed, they did. Some even cut their scent glands out. Blessed risky, in my opinion.”

“And how, pray tell, did you find out they were Omegas if they were so cleverly hidden?” Hannibal asked, both irritated his grandfather might have been right and annoyed he had somehow not realized.

“When they needed treatment they came to me first,” Berger said, cringing through the words as he helped Hannibal undress. “They was scared of you, m’Lord.”

“Scared of me?” Hannibal echoed, aghast. “Me? A doctor? Oftentimes the only doctor? What on earth were they scared of?”

“That you’d have them thrown into prison for being Omegas,” Berger said, not meeting his glare. “That you’d expose them and turn them out in a strange land, some of them. Some of them changed their minds in the end.”

“That you’d have them throwed off screaming from the battlefront; there is no possible way an Omega could manage such pressure—”

He broke off abruptly. A month ago he would have said no Omega could bear up for six years after a harsh rejection and bring an estate from the teetering brink of ruin to fruitful productivity or threaten an Alpha with nothing more than their mind as their weapon.
Unsettling, indeed.

“M’Lord, all manner of Omegas was in the last unit,” Berger said, intruding on his reflective thoughts. “That’s why they was so skittish of you.”

Hannibal frowned, recalling Captain Rogers’ unit. He’d thought them all too young for duty and had mentioned it to Rogers, had asked him if the draft age had been lowered. He recalled clearly how Rogers had laughed and had shaken his head, greatly amused by something Hannibal found entirely bereft of humor.

“That simply cannot be the case!” he said, sure Berger was having him on. “The Alphas would have known! I would have known!”

“Captain Rogers had mostly beta males and Omegas, not so many Alphas besides himself,” Berger said with a shrug. “He swore by all his men, whatever they hid up between their legs. It never made a difference to him... and honestly, you never was good at recognizing an Omega, m’Lord.”

Hannibal was entirely confused. “But Berger, they were a forward unit! I distinctly recall they had an unusual number of sharpshooters!”

“Oh, aye, m’Lord, vicious clever with their guns, they were,” Berger agreed, settling Hannibal’s coat on a hanger with reverence. “I certainly wouldn’t want to run up against an Omega in a war. They got the most to lose of anybody, ain’t they?”

“What on earth do you even mean?” Hannibal asked, thumbing through his memories of Captain Rogers’ unit for clues he must have glossed over and finding none. They had hidden themselves and done so well enough to fool a doctor of his standing.

“I mean, they got a man’s own need to protect his interests and a mother’s need to protect their young,” Berger said, as if it made perfect sense. “Nothing more determined to win than that, is there?”

Hannibal mulled that over, unable to find fault with the reasoning and unable to find chaos in the unit he’d left behind. There should have been chaos by all rights, but it had been no less disciplined or effective than any other unit he’d been assigned to.

“Berger,” he said, a thoughtful frown on his full mouth. “Those Omegas who did not come to me for treatment... did they survive?”

“A few,” Berger said, buttoning him up into his nightshirt and missing the spasm of pain that crossed Hannibal’s face. “The others made sure Captain Rogers would settle their pension on their families. A soldier who dies in the field is worth more than an Omega court-marshaled out of the military, isn’t he?”

Hannibal impatiently took over, needing to move, to do something. Breathlessly, he said, “They should have come to me.”

“They was scared, m’Lord,” Berger said, bending to gather up Hannibal’s boots.

“Better scared than dead!” Hannibal snapped at him. “I would have treated them!”

“If you’ll pardon my saying, m’Lord, your opinions on Omegas was fair clear to all who heard them,” Berger said, conversational as if they were discussing the weather. “There’s some risks a body won’t take when they stand to lose their livelihood. Better to die in a strange land, then, and let the money go home where it can do some good, right?”

Hannibal wrinkled his nose, angry and guilty, wondering how many deaths he was inadvertently responsible for, how many Omegas had chosen the betterment of their families instead of their own health for fear he would see them drummed out and penniless.

In all honesty, he wasn’t sure how he would have reacted to finding an Omega on the battlefield and that scalded him, shamed him deeply, because it was just that uncertainty which had cost the lives of brave soldiers.

“M’Lord?” Berger asked, watching him with concern.

“I find myself chastened,” Hannibal said, his words soft. “I honestly had no idea...”

“Well, they was careful you didn’t,” Berger assured him, moving to gather up his other discarded clothing. “They was just soldiers, m’Lord, there to defend their country the same as us.”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, thinking of all the faces he’d seen in his near decade overseas, wondering how many of them had fought with the added element of being exposed and reviled for their gender. “Yes, I suppose they were.”
Reflective and riddled with guilt, Hannibal retreated to his bed, his thoughts of the war becoming terrible dreams that so often plagued him, where blood never ceased flowing, where men never ceased dying, where the boom of canons and the crack of gunfire became the anguished sobs of the soldiers he had failed to save.

Will’s restless sleep was spent in nightmares of cliffs and parties full of people pointing their fingers at him, laughing at him, of his sister whispering over and over he was not safe, of Hannibal waltzing him closer and closer to the crumbling cliff edge while the watching crowd roared with laughter at his ignorance.

It was not at all restful or conducive to good health, but it did leave him waking thoughtful and sheened with sweat, flushed enough that Jimmy inquired if he was coming down ill.

“No, Jimmy, please don’t trouble yourself,” Will assured him, grateful for the cool, damp cloth his valet provided with wordless, pursed-mouth disbelief. Will wiped his heated skin with it, and washed his face in the basin, relishing the cold water on his cheeks. “Jimmy, when did you arrive here at Hartford House?”

“Oh, let me see,” Jimmy said, helping Will get dressed in the near darkness. “It was, what, ten years ago?”

Will frowned softly, musing, “You never knew Hannibal before his return from the war.”

“No, Mr. Graham,” Jimmy said, buttoning him up in the clothing which made him feel so much safer. “Just curious?”

“My sister mentioned a former Lady Clarges,” Will said, and noted the way Jimmy’s hands stilled. It was only a split second, but it was enough to prompt him to say, “He was married once before.”

Jimmy turned to his cuffs, focusing on his task and absently saying, “Zeller would know more about it than I would, Mr. Graham. He’s been here since childhood.”

“As he reminds me at every possibility,” Will said, thinking of Roland’s rather lazy and lackadaisical valet who, most times, was conspicuously not assisting His Grace. “I doubt I could get answers out of him.”

“Oh, if you manage to, Mr. Graham, will you tell me?” Jimmy teased, eyes lighting up with his usual ebullience. “I’ve been trying since I arrived here to turn that particular latch.”

Will laughed and stepped away from him, pulling his boots on and tapping his heels to situate them. He glanced back and caught Jimmy gazing at him, assessing him with his head cocked to one side. “What? What is it?”

“It’s nothing,” Jimmy assured him, his wide smile back in place. “It’s just unusual for you to ask questions now, after all this time...”

“Jimmy,” Will said, angling a repressive look at him. “Whatever you’re thinking, it isn’t that.”

“No, of course not, I know that,” Jimmy said, waving it away with one hand.

“It would be absurd,” Will insisted.

Jimmy nodded vehemently, adding, “Of course, Mr. Graham, absolutely out of the question!”

“Entirely baseless supposition,” Will said, hoping he could quell that assessing, figuring look in Jimmy’s eyes before his valet started attempting to mend fences torn down too long ago to be fixed now.

“Naturally, your curiosity has nothing at all to do with Lord Clarges returning, Mr. Graham,” Jimmy agreed, amused by Will’s scowl. “Might I suggest asking His Grace? He does adore you. I doubt there’s anything he would hesitate to discuss with you.”

“I can’t agree, Jimmy,” Will said. “Hannibal’s cousin intimated His Grace has kept me ignorant of any family matters, including the accident that took his son.”

Jimmy blinked, but it was only a momentary setback before he said, “I’m sure it’s just because he didn’t want you to worry about it, Mr. Graham! He does value your peace of mind and happiness. I’m certain he’d be more than happy to enlighten you, if only to give you the truth in place of rumors.”

Will chewed his lower lip, thoughts churning furiously.

“I’ll consider it, Jimmy, thank you,” he said. “You can go, take some time for yourself today.”

He did debate just asking Grandfather, but he was reluctant to explain himself, reluctant to bring Mina into things and potentially open Pandora’s box in regards to His Grace’s own role. He had to consider that if the rest were true, so too was the mention that Grandfather had compensated the young woman’s family for her death, possibly to keep them from inquiry. It
was unnerving to think he could not trust the man he’d grown so fond of in the past six years, but Will knew he couldn’t be sure of anything, not even if Hannibal was responsible for the accident with his saddle.

He kept his own counsel through his meager breakfast then took the matter to Mr. Hawkes, who seemed surprised at his curious inquiry.

“The family graveyard, Mr. Graham?” he asked, echoing Will’s unusual question. “It is tended by the groundskeepers, yes.”

“I should like to visit it, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, hoping the aging butler wouldn’t ask too many questions. “Strangely, as well as I know Hartford estate, I have no idea where the Lecters are laid to rest.”

“Ah,” Mr. Hawkes said, nodding sagely. “That is because the family graveyard is somewhat removed from the estate, Mr. Graham. It lies over the crest of the western ridge, near Duxbury.”

Will’s eyes widened as he figured how far that was. He had never ventured over the western ridge, lacking any reason to, and couldn’t contain his curiosity from asking, “Why is it so far away, Mr. Hawkes?”

“Hartford House was once settled there, Mr. Graham,” he was told. “A century ago there came terrible rains that flooded the entire first storey. A former Duke of Westvale, His Grace Pharis Lecter, had Hartford House moved, brick by brick, here to its current location to prevent such a thing from ever happening again.”

Will couldn’t fathom what such an effort must have cost, how long it must have taken, and he was properly awed.

“Those who had previously departed could not, of course, be disturbed,” Mr. Hawkes intoned, his sonorous voice knocking in Will’s chest. “After the flood waters receded, the cemetery was repaired and staff have tended it faithfully since.”

Will nodded, absorbing what he’d been told.

“It is very good of them to remember their family,” he said, thinking wistfully of the unkempt family plot on his father’s estate, the names and dates worn away to anonymity for the most part, the stones growing moss-covered and crumbling towards the back.

‘Stop fretting over the state of that place! You will never lie there, William...’

Will shuddered from the remembered anger in his father’s voice and shook his head, saying, “Mr. Hawkes, I will be visiting the cemetery today, as soon as I possibly can. Please have my horse saddled.”

“Yes, Mr. Graham,” he said. “And might I suggest having Mrs. Pimms make you up a basket lunch?”

Will nodded, saying, “Yes, Mr. Hawkes, that would be perfect. I think a little solitude after yesterday is just what I need.”

“It is quite a peaceful and lovely place, Mr. Graham,” Mr. Hawkes said, smiling at him. “The perfect place to read quietly and reflect on what is important in one’s life.”

Will gave him a weak smile and moved to the front door, hoping he could be gone before Hannibal made an appearance. He was desperate for some time to think, to consider what Mina had told him and what Hannibal professed to require of him.

He needed to look and see if this previous wife was laid to rest there and make his inferences from that.

He wondered if she had displeased him somehow.

He wondered if, perhaps, she had not been capable of providing Hannibal with the heir he required, the heir Hannibal now claimed to want from Will despite his former statements to the contrary.

Will’s hand dropped to his belly, spreading to cover the place where a baby might flourish, if Hannibal had his way. He had always been told by Roland that if he gave Hannibal an heir, then he would have nothing more to be concerned about and could raise his child here under the old Alpha’s watchful eye while Hannibal would, no doubt, go back to his real family.

Last night, thanks to Hannibal’s acquaintance, Will realized Hannibal had not been idly picking at him with his comments about bringing his daughter and mistress to Hartford House. She, surely, would not stand for having Hannibal’s child with Will under her care, and he imagined Hannibal would send him off to another estate with their son, perhaps to live undisturbed there.

Will’s eyes misted at the thought, his vivid imagination showing him that the family and love he’d craved for so long could still yet be his. He had so much love to give, he could more than make up for the lack their son would surely have from Hannibal.

‘And what if you give him an Omega?’

Will bit his lip, anxiety clenching like a vise around him when he recalled what Hannibal had said, that he would feel compelled to drown it rather than force it to live in such a demeaning and debasing way. He would have every right to dispose
of their child as he saw fit. It was an Alpha’s lawful place to cull their line for strength, though it had not been done in great families for centuries, not once wealth became plentiful and livelihoods were no longer threatened by a potential weak link in the chain.

“He would never,” Will murmured, absently rubbing his belly to soothe himself. “Even he could not be so cruel...”

Yet he could not shake the memory of Hannibal seizing hold of him with such violence Will had been sure he was facing the worst beating of his life, triggering a bond that had no place to exist between them. Nor could he shake the memory of the cold, careless way Hannibal had ordered him from the house, mortified and broken in just his underthings, spurned and exiled to the dangerous night and whatever fate might have in store for him.

Perhaps there was not room enough in the heart of a man like Hannibal Lecter to show clemency to a baby whose helplessness would only incense him all the more for its gender. It was frightening enough Will could not entertain the idea of a pregnancy, and grew more determined to find better and stronger products that could mask his scent and keep him safe from inciting any accidental interest from his spouse before he could leave Hartford House.

He heard Hannibal’s voice, just a throaty, wordless rumble traveling from somewhere above him as he rose to start his day, and Will quickly slipped through the front door to wait in front of the house, hoping Hannibal would not ask after his whereabouts.

Will moved out to meet his mare as she was led up, mounting up some distance from the house and taking up the basket one of the kitchen maids scurried out with. Balancing it on his thighs, he clucked the horse into a brisk trot and took one of the side trails from the estate, relaxing once he was sheltered in the thick wood. It was awkward guiding the mare with one hand and keeping the hamper in place with the other, but he found a happy medium and took the trail to the lane towards Duxbury, hoping at least to tease some truth from the tangle he’d been given.

Chapter 16

It took several hours to reach the village and, once there, Will had no idea where he was going. Duxbury was not as large as the town that had sprung up south of Hartford House, but it was large enough to have a main street with a proper cobbled road and several fine little shops doing brisk business. Deciding not to risk getting lost, Will carefully swung down from his mare’s back and looped her reins over a hitching ring at the least busy storefront, which looked to be some kind of dress shop.

Holding his basket half behind him, Will pushed the door open, wincing at the merry jangle of bells which got the attention of a bright-eyed, plump-cheeked blonde woman behind the counter.

“Well, good morning!” she said, her voice pleasantly raspy and warm. She came around the counter with a wide smile, so delighted to see him that Will looked behind him to see if someone else was there. “Can I help you?”

“Oh, yes, sorry,” he said, flushing. “I’m... I’m afraid I’m a bit lost.”

Her brows rose. “Now, that is a surprise,” she said, chuckling. “Considering what a large and confusing town we are.”

Will smiled, her friendliness putting him at ease.

“Maybe I can help you find your way, Mr...?”

“Graham,” Will said, offering his free hand, which she shook with the same sure confidence of a beta male. “Will Graham.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Graham,” she said. “You can call me Molly. Or Miss Foster if you like, but I prefer Molly. We’re not much for formalities around here. So, where are you trying to get that you find yourself stranded in my dress shop?”

“I was told there is a cemetery nearby,” Will said, and hastily added, “The Lecter family cemetery, rather.”

“Ah.” Her full mouth pursed and a troubled look fell over her face. “Any particular reason you’re looking for it?”

“I’m trying to confirm something,” Will admitted. “Seeing the grave markers would help.”

“Well, I’m not sure how it could help you,” Molly said, moving back behind her counter to grab a flannel shawl. She wrapped it over her shoulders and pinned it with absent precision before grabbing a rather floppy and shapeless hat. “But I’ll take you there.”

“Oh, no, your business—”
“I know, I know, chasing all these customers away,” she said, looking around the empty store with a soft chuckle. “Shame on me. I needed some air anyway and I don’t want to find out later you’ve gotten lost in the fields. Come along, Mr. Graham.”

She moved past him and flipped the sign on the window, holding the door wide for Will, who hurried back outside in the face of her insistence. He gathered his mare’s reins back up and set out after Molly when she beckoned him, following her down the street.

“Where are you from, Mr. Graham?” she asked, precisely his height and keeping a good pace that ate up the distance.

“Hartford Town,” he said, figuring it was close enough. He was reluctant to tell her who he was. He didn’t want her to feel pressured by his status when he had none in truth.

“Really,” she said. “No wonder you’re interested in the Lecter plots. Are you a writer?”

“No, nothing so interesting as all that,” Will said, laughing and picking his footing carefully as they turned off onto a thready, barely discernible trail that vanished into the thickening wood.

“Then what?” she asked, taking the lead.

“I... Molly, I don’t wish to lie to you,” he said, ducking a branch and holding it to pull the mare behind him. “I’d really rather not discuss myself.”

“Fair enough,” she said, her throaty laughter floating back to him. “I’ll talk enough for both of us! My mother always tried to tell me I chitter too much, but I never did hear her,” she looked over her shoulder at him and winked, adding, “I was always too busy talking! Come on, Mr. Graham, it’s just this way.”

The wood gradually thinned to high grass where the trail was more clearly worn down, branching off in several directions where it crossed a main footpath. The sun was climbing higher in the cloudless sky and Will wished for his hat to shield his eyes, envying Molly the one she kept clapped to her head against the wind.

“Here we are! Just down here, Mr. Graham,” she said, vanishing below the level of the grass.

Alarmed, Will quickened his pace to find himself standing on the rise of a high hill looking down at a widespread cemetery in the wooded valley below. The high grass was neatly cut in a wide swath around the outside of the stacked stone wall and the ground within was well cared for. The paths were even and lined with stone, the mausoleums and headstones sitting tranquil beneath the sheltering spread of massive oak tree branches that shaded them.

“Come on!” Molly called, pausing halfway down the hill to beckon him. “She’ll be fine!”

Will descended at a careful angle, his mare plodding along behind him, snorting into his ear. Will led her to the cemetery entrance and fastened her to a low-hanging branch, leaving her to munch the cropped grass in the shade where the dew still lay heavy and wet.

“Well... here we are,” Molly said, watching him tether the mare.

“Yes, here we are,” Will said, putting the basket down next to the wall. He moved inside with silent appreciation and respect, taking in the change in atmosphere here inside this pleasant, shaded resting place for generations of Lecters. “I had thought it would be bigger.”

“They lost a lot of people overseas; they were either buried there or there wasn’t enough left to send home,” Molly said, just behind him. She pulled her hat from her head and fanned herself with it, looking around with melancholy that seemed odd for people who were strangers to her. “Only the main family rests here, direct heirs and their spouses, whatever children they had who died young or unmarried. Every whip-stitch, they move the far wall out, but I imagine it’ll be years before they have to do that again. For a bunch of Alphas, they don’t breed much anymore.”

Will nodded idly, moving towards the newer stones, searching the names but mainly after the dates. He was vague on the dates—Hannibal had left the continent to go to war when Will was a mere eight years old—but he was confident he could find the grave of Hannibal’s first wife and at least put a name to the mystery.

“So, what’re you looking for, Mr. Graham?” Molly asked, moving to a stone at the far end of the cemetery where she crouched to trace the lettering.

“I’m just chasing shadows,” Will sighed, and laughed softly. “Honestly, I don’t know why I’m here or what I hoped to find...”
He trailed off when he reached the end of the row Molly was in, a group of stones catching his eye. One headstone was topped with the likeness of a cherub draped as if sleeping, wings folded in restful repose. It was clearly a child’s stone, and engraved beneath the angel was the name Mischa Lecter.

*Suffocating darkness and terror, the roar of water, the scream of breaking wood and frightened horses...*

“How terrible,” Will breathed, shuddering as he recalled Bedelia’s sad story of what had occurred. “She was so young.”

“Mischa? Four years was barely enough time for anything. It’s always so sad when it’s little ones,” Molly said, straightening to come closer. “Are you familiar with the family? There was a terrible accident. Her mother and father died with her, see? All buried on the same day.”

Will looked at the stones around little Mischa’s grave as Molly pointed to them. One read *Cyrus Lecter, Beloved Son.* It was a beautiful stone, but certainly nowhere near as grand as the mausoleums that housed past generations of Lecter heirs. It chilled Will to think that the warm, loving old man he’d come to rely on had been capable of cutting his son so entirely free of his affections that this exiled stone was the only marker of his life.

There was a stone to the left of Cyrus Lecter, much more weathered, in the likeness of a goddess gazing upwards at the sky.

*“Saule Lecter, beloved daughter and precious wife,”* Will read, and thought of the portrait in the gallery at Hartford House, the woman with dark ringlets and a secretive smile. That same picture was placed next to the gaping emptiness which had once housed Cyrus Lecter’s portrait.

Saule Lecter, Hannibal’s mother, whose date of death was precisely Hannibal’s birthday.

Bedelia had certainly failed to mention *that,* though in retrospect he should have realized it by her phrasing. The former Lady Clarges had died from childbirth, either during or from complications, and her bereft husband had promptly deposited Hannibal at Fernhill in his sister’s care and fled the country.

“Sad, isn’t it?” Molly asked, lingering at his side.

“The loss of a life is always cause for sadness,” Will murmured, thinking on what Bedelia had told him. “I wonder if there was any fondness in their marriage.”

“Some, I’m sure,” Molly said. “Though when you’re breeding for lineage, I suppose things like affection and fondness don’t weigh as heavily as one’s pedigree.”

“Duty,” Will sighed, frowning. “A poor man is free in his choices where a nobleman is not.”

“A nobleman can afford to be stripped of some choices,” Molly said, smiling to soften her sharp response. “I’m sure there’s a poor man or two who would marry anyone he was told to if it meant he had warm, sure meals and a place to rest his head without slaving his life away.”

“That is an excellent point,” Will conceded. His curiosity about Hannibal’s stepmother overcame him, then, and he turned his attention to the other stone situated next to Cyrus Lecter’s, positioned in such a way it gave Will the impression of exclusion. It was a begrudging grave on the far side of Mischa, closest to the path.

There were markings on it, characters in lettering unfamiliar to Will. Below the letters was an etching of an opera mask, with the dates of her birth and death.

Will had imagined she was young, this woman who had snared Cyrus Lecter’s interest. It surprised him to see she had been near her fiftieth birthday when she’d died, almost twenty years her lover’s senior. It made logical sense when he considered she had been famous in the opera before meeting him, but for some reason, he had imagined her nearer to his own age.

“I wish I had a means with which to read her name,” Will murmured, frustrated that even in this she would remain elusive. “I wish I had a means to know more about her at all...”

“Ryu Murasaki,” Molly supplied, surprising him. She laughed at his startled expression and said, “Believe me, Lady Murasaki was famous even in Duxbury!”

“In what way, Molly?” Will asked. “Her being an opera singer?”

“Oh, she wasn’t just an opera singer, Mr. Graham. Before she was Cyrus’s concubine, she was famous on the Continent. She performed for Kings and Queens, and had love affairs and duels fought over her,” Molly said, bending to brush a stray leaf from the stone’s flattened top, her voice filled with soft admiration for a life of such excitement. “She was from somewhere so far away, I have no idea how people ever get from there to here. Apparently, she came from some kind of royal line there and
left when her family was wiped out. There are so many versions of every story, I could never tell what was real or not, but I loved hearing all of them when I could. I mean, I never knew her, obviously, she was dead a long time before I was born, but the stories circulated for years, mostly because she was—"

“Omegan,” Will breathed, conclusions rapidly forming. He knew from Bedelia’s story that Cyrus had brought her home at some point after Hannibal’s birth, and from the dates on Mischa’s stone it could not have been too long after.

“Yes,” Molly said, frowning. “People can be so... awful about it.”

“She was the one who raised him,” he said, swiping at his heated forehead, his suspicions confirmed. “An Omega raised Hannibal.”

“Hannibal?” Molly said, snorting with a disdain that startled Will. “You’re that familiar with Lord Clarges? Be careful he doesn’t damage you, Mr. Graham. That man is a menace.”

Her sudden vitriol surprised him into looking at her and Will was dismayed by the unhappy expression on her face.

“Why would you say that, Molly?” he asked, nervous his fears would be given life, that he would find out his husband was indeed capable of arranging an accident for him to remove him entirely.

Molly’s sparkling eyes flashed fire when she met his gaze and her words were sharp as glass when she spat, “Because he killed my sister.”

Hannibal was reluctant to ask after Will come morning, still reflecting on their exchange last night and the revelations Berger had made. Hannibal worried he might look at Will and his perceptive little spouse would see his long-held, bone-deep prejudices had sunk on their foundations, not so much bedrock as sand, shifting and uncertain, and might somehow think even less of him than he already did.

Since his earliest memories, he’d been raised with an understanding he now found to be baseless. To lose that certainty, to question his own judgment and everything he’d thought was reality... it was startling and alarming.

He had, indeed, walked a world where people had played to his perceptions, content to keep him in willful ignorance. Some had done it, he knew, from deliberate intention to use those beliefs to their advantage, to push their own agendas with him. Others, such as Berger, had done it to avoid rousing Hannibal’s temper.

And so many lives had suffered for it. So many lives had been lost for it. It had taken Will, with his righteous violence and sharp intelligence, to wrap his slender fingers around those scales and pull them from Hannibal’s eyes without hesitation, forcing him to see the truth. He had never once been anyone other than himself, so perfectly honest and without guile that Hannibal had no choice but to acknowledge him.

How much he could have changed had Hannibal met someone like Will when he was younger, before he married Melinda, before he fled to the battlefields to drown his guilt in blood and death...

It left Hannibal thoughtful and contemplative, absorbed enough in his musings that he took a small breakfast alone in the solarium. He didn’t enjoy it quite so much as he’d hoped, considering his unpredictable spouse wasn’t present to distract him, but Berger made his way in with a packet of letters to tide him over.

It was a bundle of mail sent from Galley Field for him, his usual correspondence from patients and tenants, invitations for events in the Capital, and various journals he subscribed to in order to remain abreast of the latest medical knowledge.

Alana’s letter he saved for last, and opened it as the servants came to clear away his breakfast.

Hannibal,

I hope this letter finds you well, and having great success in your efforts at reconciling with your grandfather. I did promise I would write to you on occasion in your absence and especially wanted to do so now as a reminder that we are all managing quite happily here without anything in the world to trouble our thoughts but what actions you might take in haste.

Marissa is doing very well and has begun to dash about everywhere. She is running darling Margot ragged; I was sure I would need to ask you for a tonic to soothe her nerves, our girl has been so vexing! She insists on climbing the stairs the moment one’s eyes are averted, and it seems she is instantly in any single place that is dangerous for her. I am not sure who to worry over more, the child or my Margot.
I have had encouraging news from the committee you convened on the subject of the school here. I have sent along their letter to you to read at your leisure. By this time next year we will break ground, and I am sure I have never felt more proud at what we have accomplished! Margot, of course, is attempting to keep my head firmly on my business rather than in the clouds, but I find myself dreaming of the day when the women we enabled with knowledge will stand equally with men in the medical field, and it gives me hope.

The babe is healthy, strong and kicking, much as the one before him. I am sure he will be a boy this time. I dearly hope and pray so. You have kept your promise to me, Hannibal, and I will keep my promise to you—a boy for your grandfather, though I remain somewhat skeptical at your assurances that he will accept him as a viable heir.

On that matter, I must urge you—strongly urge you—to remember us with fondness and care and impart some measure of that feeling on your spouse, however you may view him. He has never once intruded on your decisions nor made a burden of himself in any respect. You have chided me before on my defense of him, Hannibal, but I stand by my words, for I know all too well what it is like to be despised by those who should love us.

I will say in closing, be careful with him, Hannibal. You left him a child behind you and he has become an adult in your absence who must all too well recall how badly you parted. Be gentle with him, as you are with us, and do nothing impulsive.

All of our fondest affections,
Alana, Margot, Marissa

Hannibal sighed and read the letter twice before tucking it into his jacket, reflecting on her entreaty. He didn’t write back—on those short occasions when they were not together, he had never written back—but he almost wanted to, if only to warn her of what Thomas would no doubt tell her the moment he visited. It relieved him that he was not at Galley Field, in all honesty. He wasn’t entirely prepared to handle Alana’s scolding, even soft as it would be.

Instead, he opened his letter from the committee, penned a series of instructions to the family solicitor, Mr. Buddish, on the subject of the school he was sponsoring, then composed an advert for an estate manager out of sheer desperate distraction.

He rang for Hawkes, who arrived with such haste Hannibal was sure he’d been hovering outside the door, and handed off his correspondence, saying, “Send these down to the post and have them mailed immediately.”

“Nothing terrible, I do hope, My Lord,” Hawkes said, turning to hand it all off to the footman behind him, where it was all whisked into the sure hands of Hartford House’s serving staff and would be cared for appropriately.

“Just some instructions for the Capital clerks. I’m posting the position for estate manager,” Hannibal said, remarking the way Hawkes’ bushy eyebrows drew together in disapproval. Smiling slightly at the wordless reproof, Hannibal said, “Will shall soon have his hands full with tending the next Lecter heir, Mr. Hawkes. He cannot be troubled with the running of Hartford House for some time.”

“Are congratulations in order, My Lord?” Hawkes inquired, knowing damned good and well he and Will had shared nothing more than mutual baiting and a few meals, to date.

“There is the matter of convincing Mr. Graham,” Hannibal said, catching slight disapproval again at his choice in words. “But I am supremely confident in my ability to do so.”

“I have every faith you will require such well-deserved confidence, My Lord,” Hawkes said, a sly smile barely touching his lips, “as Mr. Graham is a remarkably stubborn young man when his mind is set.”

“Well, then, like all bull-headed creatures, we will clash until one of us yields,” Hannibal said, amused.

“I am not entirely certain, my Lord, that you should attempt such a thing,” Mr. Hawkes offered, causing Hannibal to laugh.

“He is unusual, isn’t he, Mr. Hawkes?” Hannibal asked, getting to his feet to look idly around the room, taking in the small, unobtrusive changes his mate was responsible for. Not a single room of Hartford House missed his deft and subtle touch except for his own suite. It was strange to think of Will avoiding it all these years, a quiet respect for his privacy Hannibal had not expected.

“An Original, I believe is the term, my Lord.”

Hannibal smiled, “Oh, I do like that.”

“I thought perhaps you would.”
Hannibal’s smile faded, then. “It seems... rather lonely here.”

Mr. Hawkes said nothing but remained attentive.

“Hartford House is meant to host parties and foster large families,” Hannibal said, thinking of the House as it had been in his childhood. “It is... sad to see it so bereft.”

“It has been quiet here, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said. “All things considered.”

“Grandfather’s illness,” Hannibal said. “But Will... has he had no one to keep him company at all?”

“Lord du Maurier visits when he is in the countryside, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said.

“But none of Will’s family,” Hannibal mused. “Has he mentioned his father?”

Mr. Hawkes frowned solemnly. “No, my Lord. Mr. Graham has had no contact with any member of his family since his arrival here and rarely speaks of personal matters.”

“No contact whatsoever,” Hannibal echoed, fixing Hawkes with a stern look. Though Will himself had admitted even his sisters had not dared to contact him, he felt compelled to ask, “Not even letters?”

“I believe he wrote to the Lord Reddig soon after your departure, my Lord, but the letter was returned unopened.”

Hannibal frowned, locking his hands together behind his back and rocking slightly, his irritation escaping him in small tells his butler knew all too well.

“Unopened indeed,” he murmured. He gave Mr. Hawkes a tight, unhappy smile, adding, “I doubt he will return a letter from my grandfather unopened.”

“One does very much doubt so, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, giving him a slight smile in return. “Might I offer an opinion, my Lord?”

Hannibal’s brows rose.

“Perhaps it would be more considerate of Mr. Graham if Lord Reddig was not asked to Hartford House,” Mr. Hawkes said, unusually candid with him. “I have no firm understanding given that Mr. Graham never speaks of his family, but it would seem the relationship has suffered since his arrival here. Perhaps a less public setting would better suit a reunion in case he were to become... unpleasant.”

“Surely you jest, Mr. Hawkes? Even had he such an inclination to be rude, Lord Reddig would have to be brave, indeed, to believe he could get away with such behavior,” Hannibal said, and when Hawkes became rather still, he darkly added, “Of course, considering my treatment of Will, he would assume his child has no friends here.”

“I did not wish to be indelicate—”

“Mr. Hawkes, I assure you, I would sooner expect the ground to swallow me whole than for you to be indelicate,” Hannibal said, and sighed heavily. “Thank you, Hawkes. Your candor is appreciated.”

That earned him an incline of Mr. Hawkes’ silver-haired head.

“Hawkes, might you know of any place here in Hartford House that is Will’s?” Hannibal asked, noting the slight spasm of the old butler’s eyebrows. “That he is comfortable in, rather. I find little trace of him here at Hartford House, as if he does not live here at all.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Hawkes told him, recovering. “There is a small space Mr. Graham has claimed for himself in the attic.”

Appalled, Hannibal asked, “Why in the seven hells is he sequestered away in the attic?”

Which only garnered him a bland, hooded look from his butler, who said with sonorous dignity, “I honestly did not feel it my place to question him, my Lord.”

It carried a subtle undertone suggesting Hannibal should not question it, either, all things considered.

Embarrassed that he had to be chastised by his help, Hannibal took himself off to the nearest servants’ passage and clambered up to where the Hartford domestics made their living quarters. The attic proper was not secured against entry, but none of the servants would risk their livelihood for the sake of curiosity, so Hannibal had no doubt it remained undisturbed except for Will.

He made his way cautiously up the narrow stairs and emerged into dusty sunlight admitted through the attic windows. It was a maze of storage, but a goodly portion of the attic was still unused with more than enough large rooms to house whatever hobbies Will managed in his limited spare time.
It took some searching on his part, but Hannibal finally located it back against the far end of the House away from any of the stairways. The room he had chosen, unsurprisingly, was a small one with its own window and was empty of Will himself, much to Hannibal’s disappointment.

But it was not so empty of Will’s presence as the rest of Hartford House.

The window was clean and sparkling, the walls, rafters, and floor all diligently kept spotless. A single desk was under the window, the chair pushed in, its surface arranged with a plethora of tools and items Hannibal could not make sense of at first.

Then he noticed the lures dangling from fish-line in orderly rows from pegs, and realized what Will was about.

“You are an artist after all,” he mused, pulling the little chair out and settling at Will’s desk. He had a lure in progress, and Hannibal amused himself peering at it through the supported magnifying glass. Spools of colored thread, snips, bare hooks, assorted feathers, and bits of small found objects were neatly arranged on the desktop—it was quite a collection and each lure was unique.

“These are your watercolors,” Hannibal murmured, looking at each in turn with growing appreciation and pain as he thought about Will up here alone, working in silence on pieces no one would ever see.

It bothered him deeply, even more so when he counted the sheer number of lures Will had made over the past six years.

Hannibal got to his feet and really looked at them, picking his favorites down carefully. He gathered a nice showing before heading back downstairs to seek Hawkes.

“Ah! My Lord, there is a gentleman—”

“Hawkes, I want you to have these mounted and framed,” Hannibal said, thrusting the lines at him.

Mr. Hawkes, who had not been rattled when his youthful master had flung a frog at him as a child, did not so much as bat an eyelash to have Will’s lures offered to him.

“And is there some particular way you would prefer, my Lord?” he asked, adjusting with admirable ease.

“Surprise me,” Hannibal said, earnestly adding, “Several small frames, nothing too ostentatious, and have them set up in the various parlors.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, “Where they may be seen by visitors, is that correct, my Lord?”

“Yes, Hawkes,” Hannibal said. “I find myself impressed by Will’s various talents. I should like others to share my appreciation for his efforts.”

“I understand entirely, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, giving him a fond smile.

“Thank you, Hawkes,” Hannibal said, pleased to have it taken care of. There was a high probability Will would cosh him with something for his thievery, but he hoped not. “And have you any idea where my spouse is?”

“He has gone to Duxbury, My Lord,” Hawkes said, the very picture of dignity with the incongruous addition of several dozen fishing lures dangling from one hand. “But there is a gentleman—”

“Duxbury? What the devil for?” Hannibal asked, straightening his clothing, his own mention of his mate prompting the need to groom himself against Will’s possible censure.

“I believe he has shown some interest in the family cemetery, My Lord,” Hawkes said, stopping him cold. “He did mention his curiosity on that count.”

Hannibal’s nose wrinkled in a soft snarl and he said, “Have my horse saddled, Hawkes! That sharp mind of his is going to be the end of me!”

“And the gentleman, my Lord?” Hawkes inquired. “He says he is a servant sent from Lady Rathmore.”

“He can wait, then,” Hannibal said, restless with the desire to be on his way. “I, unfortunately, cannot.”

If Will was at the cemetery, it wasn’t from idle curiosity. He was going to confirm something, most likely the rumor that Hannibal had been married once before, and if there was one thing he did not wish to discuss with Will Graham besides the Omega who had raised him, it was the woman he had married before marrying Will.

Will watched helplessly as Molly trembled before him, her small hands clenched into fists and her blue eyes bright with unshed tears.
“Molly,” Will said, distressed by her own distress. “I don't understand. Why would you believe Hannibal killed your sister?”

“Because she inconvenienced him,” she said, stiff with anger and hurt. She swiped her forearm across her eyes and glanced back at the tombstone she'd been standing in front of. “I don’t remember her very well, she was already almost grown when I came along, but the whole town knows what he did to her. And just because he’s rich and powerful, he was able to get away with it.”

Will shook his head slightly, still confused, and leaned to look around Molly at the stone.

“Melinda Lecter, May You Find Peace In Death” was inscribed on its face with a span of dates that summed only sixteen years.

“Melinda Lecter,” he murmured, his concern sharpening. “She was your sister?”

Molly nodded and laughed, thick with tears. “Not that you’d know by looking at us, but yes, once upon a time we Fosters were part of the Lecter family.”

Will took a deep breath, fear settling in his belly like a weight. “She was Hannibal’s first wife.”

Molly nodded emphatically, wiping her face with her hands.

“My mother always told me when he first came to live with his grandfather, he met my sister at the fair and they became playmates,” she said, casting another long look back at her sister’s tomb. “She said they were best friends, then, but when she turned fifteen he cut her completely out of his life. Mother said it devastated her. She took to her bed, sick all the time, sent him letter after letter.”

Will reached out and took her hand without thinking, squeezing her fingers in his, her painful recollection like a thorn in his imagination, so sharp his heart ached for her and her lost sister.

“I’m sorry,” she said, taking a shaky breath. “This isn’t anything you asked to hear.”

“Please, tell me,” Will urged, anxiously watching her. “I-it’s something I should know, Molly.”

She looked at him for, silent and assessing, and finally nodded when Will whispered, “Please, Molly. Tell me what happened to your sister.”

“I couldn’t have been more than three or four when she got sick, so I don’t really remember much, just some things here and there and what others have told me... but one day he showed up and carted her off,” Molly said. “I do remember the coach coming. It was the grandest thing I’d ever seen. I thought Melinda was a princess and he was taking her away to a royal castle.”

She laughed sadly, and dabbed at her eyes with her shawl, the worst of her tears over.

“But he didn’t, he eloped with her like she was some kind of embarrassment,” Molly said, drawing a deep, steadying breath. “Gods it was such a scandal! We didn’t see her for a month, then out of nowhere, Mr. Stammets came and told my parents she’d died. He gave them some kind of a settlement to shut them up about it. His Grace had her in the ground that same day, no wake, no service, just brought the coffin over as soon as the hole was dug and put her in.”

Will absorbed her words in silence, a strange stillness falling over him to have his sister’s gossip confirmed. Hannibal had been married once before. She had died within a month of marrying him.

He drew a shuddering breath, pulled in different directions by what he knew and what he wanted to be true.

He desperately didn’t want this to be true.

“They didn’t tell your parents what she died of?” he asked, letting go of her hand to put his arm over her shoulder, comforting both of them the best he knew how.

Molly shook her head again, her loose hair bouncing around her cheeks. “No, they didn’t, not that I know of. His Grace was furious when Lord Clarges brought her home, though. Everyone says Hannibal killed her because he was going to be disinherited. He’s got a temper, so it makes a lot of sense. Not to mention he fled the country the moment she died. He didn’t even come to the graveside. Even His Grace had the good manners to come to the graveside.”

Will patted her again, his thoughts racing. He knew too well how easy it was to rile Hannibal, but he also knew Hannibal was not so easily forced into doing something he did not wish to do. If he’d married Melinda by choice, then the threat of being disowned like his father wouldn’t have swayed him.

But something had.
Sixteen year old girls did not just die suddenly without warning, and Hannibal had finished medical school by then, so he would have known ways to end her life that the local authorities would not think to check for.

He wasn’t entirely sure what to make of it, but one thing was certain—Melinda Foster had gone into Hartford House alive and come out again a month later in a coffin without explanation, accompanied by a large settlement.

It certainly put doubts into Will’s mind.

“I’m sorry, I just really needed to get that off my chest, I guess,” Molly said, offering him a shaky smile. “I’ve never really talked to anyone about it before.”

“Please, don’t apologize,” Will said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. “It must have been terribly difficult for you and your family to lose her, especially under such circumstances.”

She nodded, her smile firming up under the weight of her usual good cheer. “It just gets me that he never paid for it, not like us normal people would. But it’s all in the past and there’s nothing I can do for it now. I’m sorry for throwing all of that at you, Mr. Graham.”

“Please, don’t be sorry,” Will said, earnest and sincere. “You’ve had a painful loss, Ms. Foster.”

“And you have a kind face,” she said, somewhat flushed with embarrassment once the anger and hurt had drained out of her. Tentatively, she smiled at him and asked, “Do you think what you’re looking for is here?”

Will gave her a smile of his own and nodded slightly, willing to change the subject at her insistence. “It is, yes. I think I know enough. Thank you, Molly, for all of your help.”

“You want to thank me, then feed me, Mr. Graham,” she said, her raspy laughter making a welcome return. “That hamper is your lunch, right? You bring enough for two?”

“Knowing the staff, yes, I did,” Will told her, grinning. “I am more than happy to share for taking your time.”

“Well, let’s not eat in here, we’ll make them all jealous,” Molly said, gesturing at the gate. “That tree makes some nice shade and we won’t have to share with your horse.”

Will laughed softly, and the two of them left the somber silence of the cemetery to retrieve his packed lunch.

Chapter 17

The ride to Duxbury left Hannibal with too much time to think about the reasons why he had never been back, not since Melinda had been buried. He was reluctant to go there despite his provoking, pressing need to find Will, as if the ghosts of his neglected family might hold him accountable for his absence.

Now, with no company other than his own thoughts and the surety of seeing her final resting place at last, Hannibal found himself thinking about her. Their childhood friendship was still one of his fondest recollections of his time at Hartford House. She had taken the place of his lost little sister at first, being so close to Mischa in age. Hannibal had been besotted the instant they met, taking the role of her protector, much to the amusement of her parents. His middling years had passed in a blur of exploration, climbing trees, being carefree and happy, always with Melinda next to him. His grandfather had tried to discourage their association, but Hannibal had found ways around that, as children often would. Even then he’d known he would have to marry well when he was of age. He’d been told time after time by Grandfather that someone was already picked out for him, that it was settled and contracted, that he would have no choice in the matter.

Those warnings had fallen on deaf ears, slamming up against the wall of youthful surety that he knew what was best for himself. He’d been determined to marry Melinda when they both were old enough, the four years of difference between them seeming to stretch forever, long enough that his feelings for her had altered from brotherly to something else entirely.

And then she’d finally caught up to him and everything had fallen apart...

Hannibal shook off his memories of her, teeth clenching hard with feelings that had not died alongside her. He urged his horse up the lesser-used trail and cut across the fields both to shorten the distance and avoid the town itself. The fields gave way to brush and the thick of the treeline, forcing Hannibal to dismount and lead his horse the rest of the way. He came out at the top of the crest and paused, his amber eyes scanning for any sign of Will.
He saw Will's mare waiting patiently in the shade, then he saw Will sitting on a spread blanket just beyond, talking with animation to a smiling, blonde woman, who was busy packing the remains of their lunch back into a hamper.

It took him aback to see Will there, smiling and relaxed in the company of that woman, and it occurred to Hannibal then that no one had ever asked Will where his preferences lay. Everyone, even his grandfather who was the most thoughtful of Will, had assumed that, as an Omega, Will would want an Alpha male.

Seeing them there, Hannibal felt his gut clench with uncertainty, thinking that perhaps in his six years living as a beta male, Will's desires ran towards women, as Hannibal's own had.

Which begged the question why it made him feel so strangely unhappy to consider such a thing, when he had fully intended to breed Will and abandon him all over again.

‘Because you don’t intend to...’

The quiet thought arrived without fanfare, warm and small but growing stronger with every heartbeat.

Of course he didn’t intend to. He’d barely given the Addendum a thought since riding out with Will on his rounds. He’d been ensnared in fascination and new options had begun to form.

He wanted to know Will. He wanted Will to know him in return.

And the only way for that to happen was to enact vast and permanent change, not only for himself, but for those he cared for.

Will’s laughter reached him, a carefree and easy sound drifting up to Hannibal on the slight breeze, bringing an answering smile to his mouth and a blossom of warmth to chase away the ugly anxiety that had plagued him all the way to Duxbury.

He envied her, this young and animated woman who enticed Will into such easy mirth. He envied her, but he could not begrudge her. Will’s laughter was too precious a sound to resent the source, even if some small part of him simmered with envy because of it.

“One day,” Hannibal promised, his hands tightening on his stallion’s reins. “That sound will not be so rare...”

When his horse nosed his shoulder, nudging him for his inactivity, he quietly admitted, “He has an Uncommon habit of scattering my best laid plans. I find myself needing to reform them once again.”

The stallion snorted and Hannibal rubbed his velvety nose, deciding not to intrude on Will just yet for fear he would have to see all his relaxed ease tighten into nervous tension.

Molly was kind enough to lead Will back to Duxbury and put a few pumps of water into a bucket for his mare to slake her thirst. The day was turning humid in the afternoon sun and Will wearily wished his ride home was shorter.

“You came by the main lane, didn’t you?” Molly asked, stroking her fingers through the mare's mane as it slurped from the bucket, looking at Will over the top of the saddle and smiling when he nodded. “Just past the shop as you head back, you’ll see a trail on the right that cuts you back towards the cemetery. It turns past the ridge and goes straight across instead of around. It’ll save you at least an hour.”

“Thank you, Molly,” Will breathed, glad to have been told.

“Here, wait a second,” she said, and vanished into the back of her shop.

Will stroked his mare’s neck and crooned at her, enjoying the faint breeze and his blank state of mind. He had a lot of information to consider, and all of it was going to change his perception, he knew. He was putting off facing it, putting off the inevitable moment when he would have to look at everything and see Hannibal through the lens it formed. It disturbed him to think Hannibal might have been responsible for Melinda’s death, just as everyone thought. It was as if life was determined he would be attached to those without compassion or compunction—first his father, and now Hannibal.

Perhaps, it was simply all he deserved when it came down to it. Perhaps, as his father had taught him, he lacked the value required to be allowed the happiness he had hoped for so foolishly. Seeing the fresh strap on his mare, so new and obvious on his broken-in saddle, the twinge of unease returned with a vengeance and he was glad when Molly returned to distract him.

“Here we go!” she crowed, waving a hat around over her head. “Just what you need!”

“Molly, no, I can’t—”
“Sure you can,” she said, leaning over the horse to plunk the hat atop his curls. “It will keep the sun off a little, at least. Oh, don’t look so guilty, it’s one of my father’s old hats. It’s rubbish, really, so you’re doing me a favor by taking it. Only, promise you’ll get rid of it, okay? It’s too shabby to wear anywhere.”

Will grinned and nodded, flattered she would offer it to him, and pushed it firmly down onto his head. “Thank you, Molly. You’re very delightful. I really have enjoyed today.”

“Well, what can I say, cemetery tours are my specialty,” she teased, grinning. “Look, you know where Duxbury is, so don’t be a stranger, Mr. Graham, okay? Maybe next time you ride over we can go someplace less gloomy.”

“That would be very nice,” Will said, grabbing onto the pommel to swing up into his saddle and get comfortable. “It has truly been a pleasure meeting you, Molly.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Mister Graham,” she said, handing him up his basket and stepping back to give the mare room to turn around. “Have a safe trip, and just follow that trail straight back to Hartford, okay?”

“Yes, thank you,” Will said, inclining his head at her and clicking his mount into a sedate walk past the edge of town to the trail, just where Molly had promised it would be.

It was too late to prevent Will from finding whatever he’d sought, Hannibal knew. He idled in the treeline out of sight, plucking small flowers that had found purchase at the edge of the wood. He waited until Will left with his lady friend before he made his way down to the cemetery.

It was a somber reunion, almost an intrusion after so long absent, and it humbled him to be back after all these years. The spreading trees kept the place in shadows, cool and comfortable as the afternoon sun rode high in the sky, a tranquil peace that soothed him. Hannibal moved down the rows to where his closest kin rested. His father, buried with little fanfare for his disobedience; his little sister, Mischa; the wretched creature who had ruined his father and cost Hannibal his family there on her other side, close to the path and far from the proper Lecters, but there nonetheless. His grandfather’s small admiration for her tenacity, perhaps; a stubbornness which matched his own.

He could not look at his mother’s grave, not without his stepmother’s purring, soft voice reminding him, “There is no love like a mother’s love, but you will never understand that, Hannibal. You killed her before she could love you. But I should thank you for that, Hannibal. If you hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here...”

Trembling with the memory, Hannibal took a deep breath to steady his nerves. He had thought of her more and more since returning home, a presence that always shadowed him since she’d come home with his father. Death hadn’t changed any facet of that where she was concerned. He lived on with his vision—as Grandfather had said—skewed by what she had shown him. He didn’t wish to revisit any part of it, or her.

Perhaps that was why he was so reluctant to return.

He shook off the disquiet that thoughts of her provoked and focused on his little sister’s final resting place. Once he had himself under control, he bent and placed the small bunch of meadow flowers on Mischa’s grave, sighing into the quiet afternoon, “I will bring you a proper bouquet next time, my little one.”

He felt guilty for not having come to see her even once in the past years. When he’d been young, he’d come nearly every day when the grief was fresh. Those visits had slowly drawn farther and farther from one another as other things had cracked the shell of his sorrow. By the time he had married Melinda, he’d come only on the anniversary of Mischa’s birth and death, no longer able to summon the tears that had once flowed so freely.

He trembled as he knelt there among the dead in the peaceful shade, the wind picking at his hair like ghostly fingers, cool and formless. He stared at her stone but it was his last memory of her he saw instead, a split second between life and death and the way the light had drained from her eyes. She’d been so frightened, trembling on her mother’s lap and reaching for him in the darkness. None of them had been prepared for what had happened. One second she’d been alive, and the next he’d watched her slip away by the ceaseless flash of lightning cracking overhead.

“Will you forgive me?” he asked her, tracing the lettering of her name and replacing the memory of her slack, bloodied face with her sweet little smile. “I couldn’t save you, Mischa. Why couldn’t I save you?”
‘Get away!’ The voice of that woman cracked like a whip in his memories, rejecting him violently even at the moment of her death. ‘Get away!’

Even then she’d held Mischa away from him, pushing him back with her hand, batting him away as the carriage filled with water and the storm raged around them.

Her last words on this earth had been an admonishment, a reminder she did not want him, that he wasn’t hers, as Mischa was, that even in death she could not abide him.

Hannibal took a breath, the tremble becoming a shudder. He wiped at his face impatiently, pushing the memory away, shuttering it up again behind the walls he’d built to protect himself. He conjured all of his fond moments with his sister instead, those cherished times when her laughter filled the world, long afternoons spent exploring the gardens and catching fireflies in the dusk.

He smiled then despite his sorrow, recalling her dashing about in her mother’s discarded gown, bawling at the top of her lungs that she would be Queen one day. “Do you remember what I said to you then, Mischa, hm? I said you were already my Queen…”

‘She was an Omega…’

‘Disappointment implies expectation, Will. Did you have expectations of me?’

‘Once, maybe, but only for a short time…’

‘I exist, Lord Clarges. That is offensive enough on its own…’

Hannibal flinched, imagining what he would have done to any person who had treated Mischa as he had treated Will. Had anyone dared insult her, called her repellant, sent her fleeing from her new home in nothing but her underclothes, been even a fraction as nasty and spiteful with her as he’d been with Will Graham.

He would most certainly have killed them.

“I have missed you, my little darling, so very, very much,” he whispered, tears forming in his eyes because no matter how long it had been, he would never stop longing to see her again. “So much. I only hope, had you lived, you would have made me someone much different than I am now.”

She would not, he knew, love him for his treatment of Will, and he could not, he knew, continue along the same path of blind prejudice he had followed since her death. Had he known years ago, perhaps he would have changed, but there was no way to go back and change the things that had already happened, much as one might wish to.

Changing the future, however, was entirely within the realm of possibility.

Wiping his face with his handkerchief, Hannibal took a steady breathing and left Mischa’s final resting place with a loving, lingering look.

He did not stop at his father’s grave, stranger that he had always been, a stern and bewildering taskmaster resenting the place Hannibal held in Grandfather’s heart.

He moved instead to stand silently at Melinda’s grave for the first time.

He brought no flowers, nothing to appease a spirit which must no doubt rail against an unkind fate. He brought only himself, sixteen years removed from the boy who had looked down into her face as she’d died and refused to grant her forgiveness.

“How bitterly you must hate me now,” he breathed, stiff and somber at the foot of her grave. “Gone all these years and your secrets buried with you.”

He crouched down, fingers digging into the shorn grass and deeper into the crumbling earth, as if he could reach down and find her sleeping, Snow White waiting for a prince who never came.

“I always imagined I could never forgive you,” he told her, reaching for a memory of her, surprised that the details of her face came back so effortlessly. “The moment you died—” He cut off, flinching when the memory was there before him. “I should have said I forgave you, Melinda, even though I hadn’t then. I should have said it and let you rest. You were young and foolish and had the misfortune to have only myself to turn to. Sixteen years too late, Melinda, but I forgive you and I hope, wherever you are, that you can forgive me, in turn.”

He pushed to his feet, tears misting his eyes but refusing to fall.
“I have forgiveness of my own to earn,” he said, taking a deep breath. “I will have to tell your story one day, Melinda, our story, and soon. Believe me when I say the one I will tell it to would never judge you. He is a far better man than I am...”

He felt the breeze pick up again, a brush of life against his face, and for an instant he imagined she was smoothing his cheek as she so often had.

“I am so sorry for what you suffered, Melinda,” he whispered, and quietly left the cemetery, knowing it was but the first of many apologies he would soon have to make.

Will arrived back to Hartford House that afternoon to an unusual reception. Namely, a furor.

It was quite unusual to see the staff of Hartford House at a loss, but Will knew as he reached the house that they were, indeed, entirely at just such an unfortunate event.

His curiosity momentarily tamping down his anxious suspicions about Hannibal, Will rode up to the small group of gathered footmen and the tall, rather surprising figure they seemed to be watching.

“May I help?” he offered, reining the mare to a stop with a slight smile on his face.

The scent of an Alpha teased his nose, wood smoke and leather and strangely familiar.

“Lord Clarges,” the Alpha said, turning towards him and sweeping off his hat, his voice soft and husky, his posture strangely diffident for so large an Alpha. “I've been sent by your sister, Lady Rathmore. Do you remember me, Lord Clarges?”

He looked up at Will with such earnest hope that his desire to be recognized could almost be tasted.

“Francis,” Will breathed, his memories aligning the scent and the sight of him to his childhood. “Francis Dolarhyde. Yes, I remember you.”

He dismounted, handing his tired mare off to one of the staff so he could ask, “Why have you not gone into the house? Is there some problem?”

Mr. Hawkes, harried and annoyed at being late to greet him, appeared in the doorway to offer, “Mr. Dolarhyde has refused to come in. I do apologize for the inconvenience. It is extremely unusual for an Alpha to be in such a position.”

Will nodded, recognizing the issue at once. Francis had, for his own reasons, decided to wait without for Will’s acceptance and, being an Alpha, the rest of the staff did not feel comfortable forcing the issue. It was bound to cause more problems in the future, he knew, but for now he was relieved to have someone near him who was not connected to Hartford House and had nothing to gain from misleading him.

“Would Lord Clarges not come?” Will asked, wondering why his husband had not made an appearance by now, drawn by the tension and the scent of another Alpha.

“Lord Clarges left some few hours after you, Mr. Graham—”

“Lord Clarges,” Francis corrected, bristling slightly.

“Please, Francis,” Will said, lifting his hand but hesitating to touch him. Though he could match the man before him to the youth he’d known as a child, he was not entirely sure he should be so familiar with him. “The staff all call me Mr. Graham, as should you. And I apologize for your reception. You are very welcome here.”

Francis relaxed, the tension running out of his rather alarming frame, which dissipated the strange consternation and worry gripping the servants of Hartford House.

“Mr. Dolarhyde will be accompanying me about,” Will announced, looking at each of them in turn. “My sister, Lady Rathmore, is planning to join me here at Hartford House and has sent Mr. Dolarhyde ahead. As he has come both at her request as well as my own, I hope you will treat him kindly and give him every accommodation Hartford House can offer.”

“We have taken the liberty of preparing a place in the men’s quarters for Mr. Dolarhyde,” Mr. Hawkes said, firmly back in control of the situation. “If you would like to go ’round to the back entrance, Mr. Dolarhyde, I will have one of the boys familiarize you.”

“Thank you,” Francis softly said, but hesitated before producing a letter from his jacket and offering it to Will.

“What’s this?” Will asked, taking it while Mr. Hawkes stood watching, politely waiting to assist. Frowning, Will turned the envelope over in his hands, finding no markings at all except his name and a plain wax seal hastily and sloppily applied.

“How did you come to be in possession of this?” he asked, searching Francis’ face.
“I stopped in town to ask the way,” Francis murmured. “A boy from the village brought it to me, Mr. Graham. When I asked him where he got it, he would not say, not even with a promise of candies. He was a wild little boy, Mr. Graham. I was reluctant to accept it.”

“I am glad you did, for my sake,” Will said, slipping his finger beneath the wax seal and prying it up, ripping the cheap paper somewhat. He unfolded it, his concern growing with every heartbeat.

He did not recognize the writing and there was no signature, he noticed at once. He read it once, then again, his heart pounding hard in his chest, hoping the second time the contents would have changed.

Mr. Graham,

You are in mortal danger. Your husband intends you harm; indeed, he has attempted once already to murder you, just as he did the former Lady Clarges. Please, consider this warning from a place of good intentions and remove yourself at once from Hartford House!

“Mr. Graham?” Mr. Hawkes inquired, concern replacing his usual stoic calm. “Are you quite alright, Mr. Graham?”

Francis watched him with unblinking, unsettling intensity, as if able to taste Will’s anxiety.

“Yes,” Will said, barely a whisper. He folded the letter and pushed it into his jacket pocket, clearing his throat to say with more conviction, “Yes, I am quite well, thank you.”

The girth strap breaking had not been an accident and Will had never told anyone of it outside of Matthew Brown, who would certainly never send him such a letter. Only someone who had cut the strap or else witnessed it being cut would know his accident was no accident, in truth. It did occur to Will to wonder if the culprit might not be the one sending him the letter, but there was nothing anyone could gain from trying to separate him from his husband when they were little better than strangers to one another. It did seem more reasonable that the warning was genuine and the threat real.

“Mr. Graham,” Francis said, pitching his voice low so only Will would hear him. “If there is something I should know... “

“Ah! And here comes Lord Clarges,” Mr. Hawkes remarked, sounding vastly relieved. “What wondrous timing he has.”

Francis tensed and Will turned, stepping back into the shadow the large Alpha threw.

Hannibal, spying Will lingering out front, urged his horse to gallop the last stretch to Hartford House and drew up short when the acrid, sulfuric scent of another Alpha reached him.

“I've been looking for you,” he said, choosing to address his mate first, his eyes sweeping from Will's slender, composed form to the tall, glowering Alpha hovering just behind him.

“I went to Duxbury,” Will said, assessing Hannibal as he dismounted, flushed and bright-eyed from his outing. Will shielded his gaze with his lashes, studying Hannibal's reaction when he said, “I wanted to see where your relatives are buried.”

“Unfortunately, the most annoying among them have not yet been planted there,” Hannibal said, offering Will a wry smirk. He tipped his head towards the Alpha and asked, “And may I ask who your visitor is?”

“Francis Dolarhyde,” the Alpha said, bristling as if Hannibal offered some threat. Almost as an afterthought he added, “My Lord.”

“Francis is the guard I spoke to you of,” Will said, unnerved by the tension which rose between the two of them. Mr. Hawkes, never a fool, hastily gestured the waiting footmen back inside in case things escalated.

“Ah, Mr. Dolarhyde,” Hannibal said, wondering why Francis was staring at him with such intensity, but finding himself returning it, his instincts prickling in response. “Of course, you're here to prepare the place for Lady Rathmore's comfort, I expect? And when is she due to arrive?”

“She comes as she pleases,” Francis said. “My Lord.”

“Mr. Dolarhyde, if you will go 'round to the back, please,” Mr. Hawkes said, choosing an opportune moment to intervene. “We will get you settled directly.”

The look in his eyes skirted the edge of a challenge, but he obeyed Mr. Hawkes with surprising meekness once Will gave a nod, vanishing around the side of the House with his fire and iron scent lingering to wrinkle Hannibal's nose.

“You failed to mention that Mr. Dolarhyde is an Alpha,” Hannibal said once he had gone, gesturing Will ahead of him through the door which Mr. Hawkes graciously held wide for them.

“Are you rethinking your stance that I am not bonded?” Will asked, turning over his hat and the basket to the staff. “Perhaps Francis is my Alpha and I have merely brought my lover here to spite you, as you wished to spite me.”
“No, I am not rethinking my stance,” Hannibal said, glowering at him. “You are far too honest to have been lying and far too proper to have concocted such an inelegant situation, but I find it troubling nonetheless.”

“It makes little difference,” Will said, putting some distance between them as they moved through the dim, cool foyer. “You cannot refuse his presence.”

“I have no means or right to refuse his presence, little thought I like the idea of an Alpha dogging the steps of my unbound spouse,” Hannibal said, pausing there on the carpet and turning to face Will, whose eyes were even more elusive than usual. “There is a reason Alphas are not admitted into service, Will. They tend to provoke their employers.”

“Unless you are less than half the Alpha you believe you are,” Will said, his blue eyes fastening on Hannibal’s for a split second, firm and fiery, “then you should have little problem establishing your control over the staff of Hartford House, Francis included. But you should not trouble yourself, Lord Clarges. He has come at the insistence of my sister and father and will be attaching himself to me.”

Hannibal frowned. “I have myriad issues with that statement, Will.”

“None of which involve you or require your attention,” Will shot back. “Please, excuse me—”

“Will, wait,” Hannibal said, reaching out to lay his hand on Will’s arm. There was no force behind his touch but Will stilled all the same, his nostrils flaring and his anxiety spiking. Hannibal dropped his hand immediately, his fingers brushing over the fabric of Will’s jacket. “Did you find anything of interest in Duxbury?”

“Yes,” Will said, staring up at him with a directness that spoke volumes to his husband. “A great many things, Hannibal.”

Those large blue eyes flicked over him, taking in the minute details he drew such unsettling conclusions from. Hannibal was not at all surprised to hear him ask, “Why does it concern you that I should know of your past, Hannibal?”

Hannibal took a deep breath, knowing Will could have gotten little more than a sum of dates laced together with his curious intuition, unless that young lady of his had given him the generally-accepted fate of his former wife.

“There is little happiness in my past, Will,” he said, noticing how his mate responded to his honesty with almost imperceptible softening. “And little worth speaking of. I am frightened of the image you will have of me when all is said and done.”

Will’s mouth curved down in a frown. Thoughtful, he softly ventured, “Please, do not waste a moment of worry on my estimation of you, Hannibal, as I have never wasted a moment of my own regarding your estimation of me.”

“Then we are agreed not to trouble one another,” Hannibal said, a strange sinking feeling fluttering through his stomach. They scaled the stairs, the silence between them a ghost of what might have been had things not gone so terribly wrong.

Wishing his usual charm would not abandon him in the presence of his young mate, Hannibal said, “I thought considering the prior instance, I should tell you that I intend to have a soak... unless you wish to do so?”

Will cleared his throat and said, “No, thank you. Were there locks on the doors, it would not be an issue.”

“I will have that remedied,” Hannibal said, lingering in the hall outside of Will’s suite, reluctant to leave him. Strange as it felt to admit it freely, he enjoyed Will’s prickly company and wanted to find a way to mend the damage he’d done, especially after the soul-searching he had done over Mischa’s grave.

“Don’t trouble yourself,” Will said again, turning away, his hand on the door of his suite. “I will be leaving soon and you won’t need them.”

Hannibal frowned to be reminded of Will’s departure, frowned at the way he would not look at him, wondering at his tense posture and frayed nerves. He was a far cry removed from the young man who’d lunched in the shade with a pretty girl from Duxbury.

“Will,” he said, noting the faint gleam of worry in his mate’s eyes when he stirred as if to come nearer. “I suppose it is too late to ask, but I realize no one has taken your tastes into account in regards to this marriage.”

Bewildered, Will skated a glance at him and nervously asked, “Does anyone but a man get that luxury?”

Hannibal sighed. “Not usually, no, but in your case I feel it is rather important. You have lived your life as a beta male. I wonder if your tastes must match.”

“Match?” Will asked, feeling increasingly agitated by the direction of this conversation and certain he would not enjoy what it was steering towards.
“Many beta males prefer women,” Hannibal said, somewhat taken by Will’s vivid flush and awkward retreat, as if striving to put distance between them would somehow lessen the severity of his discomfit.

“I prefer women to be as any other person on this earth,” Will said, horrified by what was being so gently prodded at. “If you mean to inquire as to my other appetites, it will please you to know I have none!”

Hannibal’s brows rose. “None?” he echoed, cocking his head with a soft half-smile eloquent of disbelief. Trying to cajole just a glimpse of Will’s sharp humor from him, he added, “Even so moral a person as yourself will have other appetites, Chaplain Graham.”

“I will not discuss this,” Will said, indignant, fully prepared to go into his suite and slam the door in Hannibal’s face to escape this awful conversation. “Have you so little respect for me that you would engage me in a conversation so tasteless?”

“Taste is precisely what this conversation revolves around,” Hannibal said, exasperated. “And I ask because I do respect you and will respect your answer, Will. Do your preferences lie with women, or do they lie with men?”

“If I said ‘women’, Lord Clarges, then would you cease your misguided attempts to please your grandfather?” Will asked, hoping it would be so easy that such a small and unimportant lie could change things for the better. He might even escape Hartford House with his life and limbs intact.

“Sadly, no,” Hannibal said, disappointed by his answer, his hope of living here with Will suffering a heavy blow. “It is our duty, Will, whatever our preferences, and,” he hesitated, thinking of the blonde woman Will had been with, how disappointing their own coupling would no doubt be for his husband, and added, “however distasteful it may be.”

Will’s brows rose, his flush fading.

“A distasteful discharge of duty,” he said, angling a fathomless look Hannibal’s way. “How charming. Let’s both be grateful my disinterest in you spares us the horror we might otherwise face. Your virtue is perfectly safe with me, Lord Clarges, however little it is worth.”

Before Hannibal could say one word to explain, Will opened the door of his suite with forced calm and strode within as quickly as he could before closing it firmly in Hannibal’s face.

Hannibal had not been prepared for Will’s reaction, nor his own strange response to it.

‘...however little it is worth...’

It stung him, that soft barb delivered with such placid calm. It stung him because Will was right, he knew. Though it was expected conduct of gentlemen to seek the pleasure of company where they pleased in lieu of a spouse’s favors, he did not at all enjoy feeling... cheap.

Hannibal retreated to his suite to wash off the travel dust, casting more than one glance at the washroom door that fed onto Will’s room. He had the strangest compulsion to seek him out and admit he had seen Will in Duxbury with a woman, to ask him how he knew her and who she was, to find out the truth of where Will’s desires ran.

To be honest and tell him it did not seem a horror, that duty did not have to be onerous.

Sex and love were things Hannibal had little interest in for the most part, outside of the purpose they could serve from those around him, but his interests were leaning towards Will with surprising regularity. He had never been demonstrative that he could ever remember, not since the loss of Mischa. Even his companions had been kept at arm’s length, given only enough of his attention to keep them from pestering him with complaints, but otherwise serving their purpose for him.

But Will was Uncommon.

When he ran, Hannibal wanted to chase after him.

When he was distressed, Hannibal wanted to soothe him.

When he was angry, Hannibal wanted to witness his temper.

He was perplexing, intelligent, perceptive, and unpredictable.

And Hannibal was hungry for more.

He had to find a way around Will’s resistance, he knew. It no longer depended on the Addendum—there must be a child eventually to carry on the Lecter name, yes, but not for the sake of regaining control of Hartford House. Will’s child would be
heir for both of them, inheriting Hartford House regardless. Nothing had to change about that and Hannibal was determined to keep it that way.

His plans had folded at right-angles from their original intent. The thought of securing Hartford House through Will had lost its appeal. In just a short time of knowing him, the empty shell he had imagined in the place of his spouse had found flesh. He was a young man, badly used through not fault of his own, forced into circumstances he had not asked for by those who never asked his opinions. He had feelings, hopes, and dreams, all of which had been soundly discounted by the person who was supposed to be his partner in life. And Hannibal, ignorant of Omegas, never more than negligently interested in personal relationships, had handled him with all the care of a bull in a china shop.

“Well,” he said, dressing after his bath and still thoughtful, but determined to seek a new start. “I do not have to repeat those mistakes.”

“M’Lord?” Berger asked, putting the finishing touches on dressing him and curious about his statement.

“Have my horse brought around, Berger,” he said, deciding. “And send word to Grandfather that I’m heading to Fernhill.”

“Ah, yes, m’Lord,” Berger said. Then, after a hesitant pause, he asked, “You’re not after Lord du Maurier?”

Hannibal chuckled, amused. “No, Berger. If was going to call my cousin out, I’d have done it six years ago. Let us hope Bedelia has not packed off back to the Capital as yet, now that the Garden Party has concluded.”

“Of course, m’Lord!” Berger said. He scurried off to do as he was bidden, leaving Hannibal fairly well pleased with himself. He would see Bedelia and find out just precisely what it would take to appeal to Will’s Omegan nature. They could learn together, he and Will, more about each other, more about themselves. They could learn to tolerate one another and, eventually, enjoy one another’s company. The rest, surely, would sort just fine from there and they could work something out between them to their mutual satisfaction. Love wasn’t necessary to create a connection, after all. Kindness and polite attention, as Grandfather had told him, could serve just as well to begin with. One had to start somewhere, after all.

It wasn’t as if either one of them any illusions about love.

So what other way could there possibly be?

Will did not wait to calm himself once he gained the privacy of his suite. He went directly to his jewelry box and pried up the lining to secrete the letter beneath, hopefully hiding it well enough to keep it from prying eyes.

The contents, however, were not so easy to dismiss.

Hannibal was responsible for his accident.
Will wiped his brow, tugging fretfully at his neckerchief, overwarm and anxious.
He heard movement in the washroom, the slosh of water as his husband bathed. His memory conjured the image of Hannibal the day he’d burst in on his bath, stripped to his waist and still shedding clothes, his inherent Alpha strength slumbering but never entirely absent.
“A strength he would turn against Will without compunction.
“I am never unarmed,” he breathed, blotting at his damp brow with his sleeve. “I am never unarmed.”
He calmed by slow degrees, soothed by the mantra he knew to his core was true—he had his wits, he had his knowledge, he had his Gift, and with those things he was far more dangerous an opponent than his husband might expect him to be.
“You are not an Omega, Will Graham,” he said, staring sternly at his reflection, bolstering his confidence in his own strength. “You are not a man, nor a woman. You are only yourself and that is all you need be.”
He rang downstairs and tended to his appearance in the time it took Jimmy to reach him.
“Jimmy, please have my mare saddled and bring a fresh horse for Mr. Dolarhyde,” he said, feeling Hannibal’s presence just a room away like a physical touch against his nerves. “Mrs. Pimm’s has taken care of him, has she not?”
“Yes, Mr. Graham, he’s fed and had tea and unpacked already,” Jimmy said, his smile uncertain. “Rather hasty man, your Mr. Dolarhyde.”
“In this instance his efficiency serves my purpose,” Will said, relieved. “Tell him he is to meet me downstairs. I’ll be tending to some estate business this afternoon and he is to accompany me.”
“Mr. Graham,” Jimmy said, reluctant to do so and disturbed by his plans. “Are you sure you should be alone with a stranger who also happens to be a pretty intimidating Alpha—”

“He is no stranger to me,” Will said, though that was not entirely true, as he recalled little about Francis in the least from his childhood.

But Mina had sent him, and Mina, for all of her spoiled behavior, was the one person in the world who had ever tried to shield him, little though she had succeeded.

She was his twin, another half to his to make a whole, and he trusted her now as he always had—fully and without any option to do otherwise.

“Mr. Graham, if I may—”

“Please, Jimmy,” Will said, weary and worn. “Please, do as I say.”

“Of course, Mr. Graham,” Jimmy said, contrite. “He’ll be waiting downstairs. And in case it might matter, Mr. Graham, Lord Clarges has asked for his horse to be saddled, so you might take a few moments.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will breathed, glad to have been warned, and waited in the silent room once Jimmy left, listening for some indication Hannibal had already gone.

It was only once he heard him descend downstairs that Will wondered where he might be going or, worse, who he might have gone to see now that he knew he would find no welcome in Will’s own bed.

Chapter 18

The rhythmic, relentless ticking of the clock over the mantle filled the growing silence and Hannibal shifted in the stiff, uncomfortable parlor chair, pinned beneath his cousin’s cool, assessing blue gaze.

She blinked, a soft frown pursing her mouth.

“Bedelia,” Hannibal said, striving for patience. “Have you anything to say? If you prefer to stare silently at me, I will return to Hartford House—”

“I am... attempting to find something beneficial to say to you,” she informed him, an expression of polite horror tightening her smooth features as she settled her teacup delicately on the saucer in her opposite hand. “Considering what you have just told me.”

What he had told her was, of course, everything. Everything to do with Will, at least. How he had reacted, the words he had said, the actions he had taken since the moment they had met.

It felt like hours since he had stopped speaking, hours in which Bedelia silently watched him, sipping at a cup that never seemed to empty.

“And yet in all of that I never heard you speak of a bond,” she said, and Hannibal shifted in his seat again, fidgety as a child. She cocked her head, watching him as if he was some oddity on display.

“Will is not bonded to anyone,” he said. “You were mistaken.”

“Mistaken,” she softly echoed, an amused smile curving her lips.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, summoning a scowl. “He insists no one is bonded to him. I believe him.”

“You choose to believe him,” Bedelia corrected.

“I trust he tells me the truth,” Hannibal said, surprising her.

After a long silence, she murmured, “That is, perhaps, the most comforting thing I have heard you say thus far.”

“Comforting enough that you will help me to understand what I have neglected up to this point?” Hannibal asked, somber and serious.

Her mouth pursed with the force of her thoughts. She gazed at him, assessing him, and softly said, “One of the first things an Alpha child is taught, Hannibal, is that touch holds a sacred place between us and Omegas. It conveys things even our intentions might deny us. The slightest touch can deeply affect an Omega and, in turn, affect the one who reached out.”

Hannibal considered it, thinking of Will’s reactions to him.
“I have great difficulty imagining you could be so entirely thoughtless in your dealings with Will,” she said, gathering herself for a stern lecture. “In some respects, you are incredibly and undeservedly lucky that Will Graham was clearly not raised as most Omegan children are, or he would already be far beyond your reach... or the reach of any other Alpha.”

Filled with discomfort and guilt, Hannibal restlessly reached for his own teacup and took a sip. He honestly wished it was something stronger, but no matter how uncomfortable or odd this meeting would no doubt become, he was determined to see it through.

He had to find a way to reach Will.

He had to find a way to both understand his Omegan nature as well as give Will the opportunity to explore it himself, instead of forcing him to restrain even the least of his instincts.

“You should have taught me.”

“You know he did not,” Hannibal said, avoiding her gaze. “Rather, what he taught me instead.”

“And by the time you came to Grandfather, it was too late to... undo the damage regarding your instincts,” she observed, and exhaled a soft, heavy sigh. “I can only inform you, Hannibal. I cannot make you understand at the level a child’s acceptance grants us.”

“If I am informed, I can make my way from there,” Hannibal said, meeting her gaze directly. “I offend him. Without meaning to, I blunder gracelessly into places we both are unaware of and neither one of us knows how we got there or how to get back out again without bloodshed. I need to understand how to connect with him. I need to understand where I am going wrong.”

Bedelia considered, then reached out to pull the velveteen cord next to the fireplace, still watching him.

The Fernhill butler turned up with near immediacy, silent and attentive.

“Lord Clarges will be staying for dinner,” she said, a slight smile appearing. “We will take a tray here for two. Please inform mother we do not wish to be disturbed.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“We have a great deal of work to do, Hannibal,” Bedelia murmured, settling in with cat-like satisfaction. “I do hope you’ve come prepared.”

Hannibal thought of Will, of Mischa, of the Omega who had raised him and her entourage which had shaped the entirety of his perception regarding her gender.

His voice was firm and steady when he told her, “Yes. I am entirely prepared.”

It was a relief for Will to get back to his routine, however little his husband and grandfather wanted him doing his work. Francis rode with him, silent and unobtrusive but watchful in a way that left Will with no doubt that Mina had confided her fears in him. It made him feel slightly less vulnerable, but not more safe.

He could only rely on himself for that.

They rode his rounds, and Will had to ignore the weighty knowledge this was all just a breath away from being lost to him along with the life he had managed to build here.

Things, he was forced to admit, were already being lost to him. The tenants and farmers were all polite to him. Far too polite, truth to be told. The loss of their prior easy camaraderie forcefully brought home the fact that Hannibal’s efforts had managed the desired effect.

He was no longer Mr. Graham, land agent and employee of Hartford House.

He was William Lecter, Marquess of Clarges, equal in rank and importance to his husband and, thus, pushed beyond the boundaries of their comfort with him.

“Mr. Graham,” Francis said, so softly Will almost did not hear him over the cheerful chirping of birds. He looked over at the Alpha riding a proper distance away, his brows rising in inquiry.

“Your thoughts look heavy,” Francis said.

“They are,” Will said, and hesitated. He longed to confide in someone, to confess his fears, and there was no one in Hartford House with whom he dared do so, not even Jimmy. Roland was likely complicit in whatever had befallen the former
Lady Clarges, and that lost him his most powerful ally. Though he did not doubt the strength of Grandfather’s affection for him, he knew it would never outweigh the love he had for his grandson, nor should it. If Hannibal managed to send him to an early grave, Roland would move to conceal it.

And who would mourn his loss?

The thought prompted him to confirm, “Did my sister speak to you of my situation?”

“Yes,” Francis said, his blue eyes turning back to their surroundings, restlessly flicking as if searching for danger even on such a benign, relaxed, late afternoon. “Did you tell anyone about your saddle?”

“No,” Will said, somber. “It wouldn’t have done any good.”

Francis frowned, considering, and said, “Mr. Graham, you know your sister loves you very much. Should anything happen, she would not let the matter rest.”

“I appreciate that, Francis,” Will said, offering him a smile. “I would rather not give her reason, however. I would prefer no more accidents befell me.”

“We wouldn’t like for anything bad to happen to you, either,” Francis said, his cautious tone plucking at Will’s nerves. “Lord Clarges is back now and we’re all... worried.”

Will blew out a soft breath, trying to gain control of himself. “I find myself worried as well, Francis. I am afraid I am somewhat better informed than I previously was.”

“The former Lady Clarges?” Francis asked, looking back at him again with piercing intensity.

“You know about her?” Will asked, startled. “Francis, how do you know about her? No one speaks of her here.”

“Plenty spoke of her at the time, Mr. Graham,” Francis said, breaking his gaze to shift in his saddle, his voice gruff when he added, “And Lady Rathmore had me find out about her some months ago.”

*Some months ago.*

Will’s eyes narrowed, uncomfortable suspicion squeezing around him. Trying to allay it, he asked, “Francis, why was Mina asking after the former Lady Clarges months ago? She has had six years, after all, to sate her curiosity... why now?”

“She did not say,” Francis said, and that had to suffice. “Only that she was concerned for you and wanted to know what he had done.”

Will nodded stiffly, patting the mare when she shifted in response to his unease. “And did you find out, Francis? Do you know what happened to Melinda Lecter?”

“No, Mr. Graham,” Francis said, chastened. “Just that she was young, and married but a short time before her death, and the talk in Duxbury was of his guilt.”

“No more than I know, then,” Will said, disappointed and feeling rather ill. “I hate to admit it, Francis, even to myself, but I am... frightened of Hannibal.”

Mina’s conversation with him at the Garden Party, Molly’s tearful and angry recounting of her sister’s sad fate, the letter he’d received, his saddle being cut—all of it forced his Gift to focus on the understanding that Hannibal was entirely capable of doing what he’d threatened to do six years before. He was the only one who could benefit from Will’s death, after all. Will had never known anyone well enough or long enough to offer such a grave offense that someone would seek his life. Though he tried to deny it, over and over he came to the same conclusion, and each time he did so, his bond gave a mighty tug within him, a physical pain that caught him by surprise each time.

“Mr. Graham,” Francis said, earnest. “If you need anything, anything at all, you can rely on us. I am here to watch over you. Your sister will be here soon. We will protect you.”

“Thank you, Francis. It is reassuring to know I am not without friends. However, I do not intend to make a target of myself here, where I am no longer able to be the person I once was. As you have seen for yourself, news of my affiliation with Hartford House has already reached the four corners of the earth,” Will said, huffing a sad, frustrated little laugh.

“It has, but it’s clear no one cares for the way he’s dealt with you, Mr. Graham,” Francis told him, rather forcefully so. “No one cares to have a master who treats good, kind folk as he’s treated you. What sort of man invites his mistress into the home he shares with his spouse?”

Will flushed and looked sharply at Francis, asking, “What are you talking about, Francis?” He knew full well no one could know of Hannibal’s intentions to bring Miss Bloom and their daughter to Hartford House, as the issue had been spoken of
when they were alone. Nor had anyone from Hartford Town been present at the Garden Party where that clueless friend of Hannibal’s had confirmed it.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Graham,” Francis said, immediately contrite. “When I stopped in town to rest my horse, before that little boy brought your letter, I overheard talk from some... unsavory woman. Apparently, he has called for her and she’s to meet him up at the manor house, right under your nose.”

“Francis, please—” Will said, heart clenching and stomach sinking.

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” Francis said, stiff with offense on Will’s behalf. “She was talking about it even to strangers, crowing about it to everyone she saw how she’s going up there to be with him. You don’t have to stand for being treated so, Mr. Graham...”

“There is nothing I can do!” Will said, appalled at how sharp his voice was, but bitter in his anger. He softened his tone, took a deep breath, and said, “I have no means to change anything, Francis. I am powerless in that regard.”

Francis’ pale blue eyes flashed then with something Will was entirely too familiar with and recognized at once—a capacity for violence only just restrained. It was a dangerous gleam, and it accompanied dangerous words.

“You are never powerless. You have friends here now, Mr. Graham. Perhaps someone wanted to hurt you by cutting your girth strap. Perhaps someone wanted to kill you.”

Will’s heart roared in his ears, the noise of it trying to remind him that this was his life, however worthless it must seem to some, and he was terribly vulnerable to the man he’d bonded to.

“Wouldn’t it be a relief, Mr. Graham, if you knew you had friends who could take care of that someone for your sake? Friends who gladly would take care of it?”

Will swallowed hard, trembling at the inference.

“Had I such friends, Francis,” he said, careful with his words, almost calm to be faced with something so familiar as the threat of violence. “I would be grateful for them to wait such dedicated acts of loyalty until such time as I could fully appreciate them.”

Francis smiled. It was nearly as unsettling to see as the sudden intensity that had gripped him. The strange gleam retreated, sequestered away once more behind the diffident, shy man he presented to the world.

But Will saw cracks in his mask, and what looked out at him breathed sulfur, testing powerful wings to strain the seams of the man before him.

It was deeply disturbing to think people could hide themselves so thoroughly, but deep down in his soul, in a place that would defiantly break before bending, Will realized he wasn’t surprised at all. Everyone had a dark hidden heart, he knew, even himself.

Not all of them showed it as easily as Hannibal Lecter.

“Then I’ll say nothing more about it, Mr. Graham,” Francis said, inclining his head with a slight, secretive smile. “And be relieved to know you understand me.”

“Oh, yes, Francis,” Will said, thinking of the fall he’d taken, the dead Lady Clarges, the corner he was being backed into. “I understand you very well, indeed.”

They returned home to a second round of chaos.

There was an unfamiliar coach in the drive Will only briefly noted was piled high with luggage before Francis murmured, “Your sister has come.”

“She is?” Will urged his mare into a trot, eager to reach his sister. He heard her before he saw her, her voice raised with indignant outrage at how the footmen were handling her trunks.

“—my Lady, I am merely trying to convey that we are even now preparing a place—”

“My brother has invited me!” she said, and when Will hastily dismounted and reached the front door, it was to find his petite sister standing with her hands on her hips before a flustered and repentant Mr. Hawkes.

“Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, inserting himself into the fray and drawing Mina back by her arm. “I do apologize, I had no idea my sister would arrive so soon. It was badly done of me to not inquire for the sake of the staff.”
“Will, you don’t apologize to servants,” Mina said in a scandalized whisper.

“Mina, please, hush,” Will said, taking both her hands in his to offer Mr. Hawkes a smile. “Please, Mr. Hawkes, have Mrs. Henderson send the girls to prepare the Victoria Suite.” He looked back at Mina, telling her, “It is close to mine, Mina. The best suite in the house aside from my own and Hannibal’s.”

Moderately mollified, she glanced around and asked, “And where is Hannibal?”

“I really couldn’t say,” Will admitted, drawing her inside, Francis and his strange behavior almost forgotten behind him. “Heavens, how little regard he has for you!” Mina complained, allowing Will to escort her to the drawing room while her trunks were taken upstairs. “What a horrid man he is!”

“Mina, please,” Will said, hoping none of the servants had heard her. “He is well-respected and a man of importance. It is not wise to disparage him in his own home.”

“You mean your home,” she corrected, flouncing down onto a settee with Will next to her and dragging her hat off with a sigh.

Alarmed, Will asked, “How did you know of that arrangement? I was given to know it was not made public.”

“Oh, darling,” Mina sighed, laughing. “It was the biggest to-do in town when it happened! Everyone knew about how he’d left Hartford House in a fury with his ancestral home handed over to his new spouse! Goodness, the chatter could’ve burned the ears off a devil!”

Will frowned, feeling rather ill again, his temperature rising once more, a light sheen of sweat appearing on his upper lip and brow.

It was little wonder Hannibal wished to kill him. He had no idea how a man as proud as his husband could stand for such gossip for six whole years.

“Is Francis tiring yet?” Mina asked, unaware of his silent reflection, choosing instead to fuss with her dress. “He is so dogged in his tasks, I felt I should never get rid of him!”

“He isn’t bothersome in the least,” Will told her, his smile fading somewhat when he recalled Francis’ threatening words spoken in an offer of assistance. “It is a relief to have him here, to have both of you here beside me.”

Mina’s smile was bright and wide, a painful reminder to Will of how his own smile might have looked had things gone differently. But there was some measure of satisfaction to be felt in seeing a face so similar to his own so entirely happy and without cares. It was the law of his life with his sister—if he could not be happy, then she should be, and a part of him would feel it through her.

“Ah! You will not introduce me to His Grace in such a state, I hope!” she said, alarm coloring her features with a pretty pink blush. “My maid will need a day, at least, to get my wardrobe presentable! I cannot face such a great man as I am, Will!”

“No, Mina, I would never insist and neither would he,” Will assured her, smiling at her fussing. “He has been reclusive these last few years. His health is not what it could be and he sleeps more than he would prefer, but he has earned his rest.”

“No doubt your husband hopes it to be eternal!” she said.

“Mina! That is entirely inappropriate!” Will scolded. “He may despise me, but Hannibal has nothing but love for his family! Honestly, the things you say!”

He stood, agitated and uneasy, the mention of his husband reminding him of what else Francis had said—the Widow Reynolds and her bragging, making lies of Hannibal’s assurances they were not and would not be lovers. He wanted to believe it was nothing more than a stupid woman making a thoughtless play for advantage, but in his current dark frame of mind, he couldn’t help but dwell on it, wondering if it was true.

Will turned his eyes to the window, worry wrinkling his brow, thinking that Hannibal might even now be in Hartford Town with her, plotting how best to manage his murder.

“I am so dreadfully tired, darling,” Mina said, heaving a heavy sigh. She craned a look at him, assessing him with her own shrewd intuition. “It’s such a long ride from the Capital and I got such an early start to get here before dinner.”

“I know, Mina,” Will said, pulled from his thoughts to soothe her, a smile curving his lips. “I am sorry. I had no idea when you were arriving and Francis could not tell me.”
“Well, it’s all worth it to be with you,” she said, delighted to have his attention once again. “How glad I am that I came, Will. You will surely need me now, with your husband home with such intentions. How lucky we both are I could arrive so quickly, aren’t we, darling?”

“Yes, Mina,” Will said, as he knew he must. “We are both of us lucky.”

His sister smiled like a lively, lovely mirror, reflecting his best back at him, well pleased.

Will escorted his sister upstairs once her suite was ready and visited with her there as Gretchen, her maid, unpacked with the help of the Hartford Staff. Despite her insistence she was near dead from exhaustion, Mina kept up a lively stream of chatter on the current events in the Capital and Will was desperate enough for distraction to simply listen. It was an easy, impermanent escape, imaging the world as she saw it—glittering and bright, full of sights and sounds and smells that were all uncharted territory for him, meeting people from distant lands and famous public personalities. It was a world in which Mina absolutely belonged, and a world which Will knew he himself would never see, never fit.

He had never fit anywhere. Not even here at Hartford.

“But darling, you just let me go on!” Mina scolded, emerging from her washroom pink and rosy from the heat of her bath, which she’d taken with the door standing wide, as was her habit.

“I enjoy hearing you speak of your adventures in the Capital, Mina,” Will said, moving from the open doorway to the dressing room, where he’d stood with his back to her just for the sake of propriety, idly watching Ms. Speck arrange Mina’s vast and surprising wardrobe. “But how is your husband? You have said nothing of him.”

“He is as happy as a man can ever be,” Mina sighed, pushing past him to vanish within. Will was relieved when Gretchen closed the door to dress her mistress, though he could still hear Mina’s vibrant voice saying, “He drinks, he gambles, he buys jewels for his mistress, and he bores me to tears on those rare occasions when we happen to speak. I am glad to be parted from him, darling, I assure you.”

“I had worried you would miss him terribly,” Will said, situating himself in the little chair next to the window, looking out at the scenery again, the familiar boundaries of his world for the past six years. “I wish you were happier, Mina.”

“I am far happier than you are, Will,” she said, and there was a long pause filled with her cursing at her maid softly before she emerged in her undergarments and dressing down, flushed but smiling. She sat across from him, watching him with a small smile. “But you must tell me everything, Will. That letter of yours was appallingly short and we had no chance to truly speak.”

“What would you like me to tell you?” Will asked, tearing his gaze away from the window to rest on her face, his eyes meeting hers.

“What was it like when you got here? What happened to make him leave? How have you spent the last six years, dearest? You can confide in me, Will. We are twins, are we not? Surely, after all this time, alone and friendless in this ghastly place, you must long for someone to talk to without hesitation? I am that person for you, Will. I have always been that person, haven’t I?”

“Hartford House is not ghastly, Mina! It is beautiful and I have spent these many years comfortably enough. It is only my experience with Hannibal that has been... unpleasant,” Will breathed, uncomfortable just thinking of it. “But perhaps it is relevant, Mina. Six years ago he threatened to have me killed.”

She remained silent, simply holding onto him, her cool little hands warming in his.

Will searched her face, took a deep breath, and he told her everything.

It took longer than he thought, and was harder than he imagined it would be, but once the words started, they flooded out of him like a dam had broken. His memory replayed every instance with such accuracy that he could, word for word, recount to his sister every exchange he had with his husband from the moment of their meeting, and she listened with wide-eyed attentiveness.

By the time he finished catching her up to date, she was even more convinced Hannibal was the one behind the incident.

“I am so profoundly relieved I am here with you, Will,” she breathed, kissing his hand again and pressing it to her cheek. “To think I might have lost you! He could come into this room at any moment and do you to death in your bed! Goodness, how
frightful! What a terrible cloud to live under, being hated in your own home and so deeply reviled! What an awful, unkind man he is, to keep you trapped in this marriage when all you wish is to go away!"

“I have made arrangements, Mina,” Will said, her words carrying a barb he hadn’t expected to feel. “I will be leaving Hartford House. I will give you notice, however, so you and Francis may join me when I do. I wouldn’t expect you would prefer to remain here with Hannibal as company.”

“Heavens, Will, I should rather fling myself out of the window!” she said, letting go of him to surge to her feet. “But look at the time! Goodness, how long we’ve spent here speaking of your misfortune! I find it has all quite drained me, darling. Please, allow me a little time to rest and order my thoughts before dinner?”

“I have come and I will stay,” she said, the intensity of her words somewhat surprising him. “I will stay until this all is settled, Will.”

He let go of her and dropped his hand, strangely uneasy, and retreated a pace.

“Thank you, Mina,” he breathed, and excused himself from her suite.

He headed towards his own set of rooms with the intentions of dealing with some built up estate correspondence, hoping it would help to settle the odd alarm his sister had raised in him. He was stopped at his door by Mrs. Henderson on her way up the stairs with a tray for his sister.

“Ah! Mr. Graham! His Grace wishes to see you before dinner,” she called, pausing on her way to address him. “I do hope the menu will suffice?”

“Oh, yes, Mrs. Henderson, it will serve very nicely,” Will assured her, smiling to allay her worries. “My sister tends to speak before she thinks and can be particular in her tastes. Please let Mrs. Pimms know it is no reflection on her skill and her efforts are always above and beyond what we expect or deserve.”

Mrs. Henderson gave him a soft, knowing smile and said, “I will, Mr. Graham! And thank you for being so thoughtful of us.”

Will left her with a smile, making his way to Grandfather’s suite and entering after a soft knock. He found Grandfather settled with a tray in his bed, Zeller at close, if rather lax, attendance.

“You wished to see me, Grandfather?” Will asked, moving closer but not sitting down.

Zeller was snapped from his idle inattention by Roland angling a hard look at one of the chairs placed nearby. The good-natured valet hastily retrieved one and placed it for Will to sit, gesturing gallantly at it, which only earned him another dark look from Grandfather.

“You cheeky little brat, go make yourself useful somewhere and leave us in peace!” Roland said, and Zeller took the order with a wide grin and an irreverent, “Of course, Your Grace.”

“That boy has never taken a thing seriously in his entire life,” Grandfather complained once he had gone, inspecting his tray with a weary sigh, as if even the prospect of eating was tiresome. “What unfortunate luck I was so very fond of his mother!”

“Are you feeling unwell, Grandfather?” Will asked, concerned by how pale he was. “Would you like me to read to you?”

“No, no, Will,” Roland said, smiling at him with genuine fondness. “No, I only wished to see you and tell you personally to pass along my excuses to Lady Rathmore, I am not quite up to being at table this evening.”

“I am sorry, Grandfather, that I did not consult you—”

“Will, this is your home,” Roland said, solemn. “Your family is welcome here, I only wish they had come before now so you were not so lonely all these years.”

“I have not been terribly lonely, Grandfather,” Will said, thinking of the nights he’d spent reading book after book to the aging Alpha before him, trading musing thoughts and listening avidly to Grandfather’s recollections of distant lands he had visited as a boy. “I prefer my own company, or the company of just a few.”

That won a wry smile from Roland, who said, with a touch of amusement, “I am not calling off my little dinner party, Will. But I do wish your dear sister had given you and my grandson some time to get to know one another again.”

“I know Hannibal as well as he ever wants me to,” Will said, feeling the soft pulse of his husband’s breath against his mouth, the light touch of fingertips drifting down his throat.
The sickening shock of his saddle breaking free to send him falling helplessly to the ground.

“Will?” Roland asked, concerned when he jumped as if someone had pinched him. “Are you quite all right?”

“Yes, Grandfather, I'm sorry, I just... it is nothing,” he said, summoning a smile. “I suppose it will be for Mina and I to entertain ourselves, as Hannibal has gone.”

“Only to Fernhill,” Roland supplied with suspicious haste. “He had something or other to speak with Bedelia about and he is an ungodly impatient boy.”

Will nodded, but an entirely unhelpful part of his mind quickly reminded him the road to Fernhill ran through Hartford Town and it would take little effort on Hannibal’s part to stop there, with even less effort on the widow’s part to accompany him back to Hartford House.

“You look as if you do not believe me,” Roland gently said, cocking his head. “Has something happened? I was told you rode to Duxbury, Will. Have you found something there which you would like me to clarify?”

It was the first time Will truly doubted the older man who had been so thoughtful of him for the past six years. It was a frightening, ugly feeling that left him hollow, but he knew better than to give voice to it.

Calmly, carefully, with composure honed in the fire of his father’s temper and perfected to an art, Will said, “No, Grandfather. I merely wanted to pay my respects.”

“You are far too intelligent to have gone for no reason, and far too shrewd in your own counsel to confide it in me,” Roland said, and raised his hand in a staying gesture when Will looked as if he would protest. “No, Will. You are a young man who is wise beyond his years. Trust your instincts. If you trust nothing else in this world, trust yourself to know what is true.”

Moved, Will impulsively reached out and grasped Grandfather’s papery, warm hand in both his own, swallowing hard against emotion that tried to break the seal on his control.

“You are my pride and joy,” Roland said, covering Will’s hand with his free one. “You are strong in ways most people are never pushed to become, and despite the circumstances that have affected you, you have never once complained or lost your capacity for compassion and caring. Never forget that, Will. That is who you are, and nothing and no one can ever take that from you. Not myself, not your father, not your sister, and certainly not my grandson.”

Will smiled, and managed a small nod, fingers clenching on Roland’s when the old Alpha gave his hand a squeeze.

“No, off you go,” Roland said, releasing him. “And send that useless boy back in here to read to me. He might as well do something to earn his wage.”

“Yes, Grandfather,” Will said, and did as he was told with his heart lighter, a little more confident he could fight whatever fate might have in store for him.

He had survived his father for eighteen years, after all.

He was not about to be done in by the likes of Hannibal Lecter.

It was full dark by the time Hannibal returned to Hartford House, his head still swimming with newfound information.

He should have learned it as a boy from his stepmother, or from his father, but all his father could ever tell him of Omegas was that one day he would understand how a man could lose his wits for one.

And she... that creature...

‘I love you, mother!’

‘I'm not your mother, little fawn. Never, never call me that...’

‘I love you anyway!’

‘And what is a boy’s love worth, hm? It doesn’t make my life better, does it? You give it to me one day, Hannibal, when your love is worth something...’

Hannibal flinched still all these years later, the child in him who had never survived that encounter clinging to the memory of what had harmed him.

She had taught him, oh yes, all too well.

She had taught him Alphas were monsters to be controlled, that there was nothing too small it couldn’t be bartered and bickered and haggled over, that someday an Omega would play with him like a puppet on strings, as she had with his father.
She had taught him that affection was trivial and love had a price, that some love was worthless, that strength and stoicism were to take the place of his need for attachment if he ever wanted to survive in a world which would never have a care for him. She had rebuffed and refused and hardened him to suspicion until he trusted nothing from her, nothing at all. She had surrounded herself with Omegas who embodied the worst qualities of their sex, giggling and stupid things who teased him, their behaviors impressed on his malleable young mind, the only examples he'd ever had. There had never been a reason to imagine others were not the same.

But Will...

He smiled, thinking of his mate on his first day home, asking, 'Are you trying to insult me, Hannibal?'

His sharp-tongued, shocking, vibrant, violent little spouse was her polar opposite, calm and capable even when goaded into a temper. He was a fascinating mixture of simplicity and complexity with whom Hannibal could never seem to communicate properly.

But that, hopefully, would change now, with Bedelia’s thorough instruction.

At least now he could keep from unintentionally suffocating his spouse with his inexpert and accidental intrusions onto his person.

Hartford House was dark but for a few lamps up in the servants’ quarters, and the lantern of the night guard wobbling off on his rounds. Hannibal stabled his horse himself, reluctant to go wake Peter or one of the stable lads so late. He half expected to be locked out, but the door swung open on cue as he approached it.

“Mr. Hawkes, you should’ve made one of the younger ones wait up at this ungodly hour,” he said, grinning at his butler’s dignified performance, not affected in the least by the time.

“I take my duties to Hartford House very seriously, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes reminded him, closing the door and locking it up tight behind him. “The Butler is the gatekeeper of a great House. It is a considerable responsibility and an even greater honor.”

Hannibal reached to take a taper to get him upstairs and paused, testing the air for the faint scent of perfume still lingering.

“Have we had guests this evening, Hawkes?” he asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Lady Rathmore has arrived, my Lord,” Hawkes said, politely not acknowledging Hannibal’s soft, sour curse. “She is in the Victoria suite at Mr. Graham’s request.”

“Forewarned is forearmed,” Hannibal said, and cast his eyes heavenward. “This does complicate the situation more than I would like. How long is she staying.”

Much to Hannibal’s dismay, Mr. Hawkes said with steady, bland serenity, “She has made no mention of leaving, my Lord.”

Heaving another sigh at this unexpected bump in his path to get to know his spouse, Hannibal put an end to his day and went upstairs for some much-needed sleep.

zzz

Something woke Will sometime in the night, rousing him from his fretful, horror-laced sleep, confused and far too warm. He couldn’t place at first what had drawn him from slumber and waited for a long, tense moment, straining to hear anything strange.

Just as he settled again, he heard a creak on the landing outside of his door and a soft thump.

Alarmed, wondering who on earth was outside of his door this late, Will crept out of bed, dragged his robe on, and opened his door.

The hallway was black as pitch, the lower level a lighter darkness thanks to the high windows. He could just make out the shadow of a figure at the head of the stairs and called out softly, “Jimmy? Is that you?”

The figure turned and darted down the stairs as if startled.

Concerned, Will started after them, his hand reaching for the banister to feel his way.

Rough hands shoved him squarely between his shoulders and Will cried out as he tumbled head first down the stairs, smacking into the carpeted risers as he rolled down, bouncing from the railing and striking his head on the floor when he landed, the world swimming in dizzy chaos.
Chapter 19

Will lay where he landed, taking stock, his head flaring with pain where he’d struck it. He groaned, the ache in his skull sharpening, wincing as the impact made itself known all over his body.

“Mr. Graham! Mr. Graham!”

“Will! Oh my goodness! Will!”

The voices of Mr. Hawkes and Mina reached him through the thundering in his ears and Will opened his eyes, finding the butler, the housekeeper, Jimmy, and Mina looming over him by lamplight to help.

“What on earth happened?” Jimmy gasped, helping him sit up. “We heard you all the way upstairs!”

“Will! Are you hurt, dearest? Oh my gods!” Mina fretted, pale and frightened, her fingers fluttering over him like butterflies, uncertain where to land or what might pain him.

“There was something on the landing,” Will said, biting his lip slightly in discomfort as her questing fingers skimmed over his rib cage, waking a flaring ache that stole his breath. “I-I tripped over it. I was just clumsy…”

Mrs. Henderson rushed up to check and Will heard the low drone of Hannibal’s voice when he spoke to her, a soft purr accompanied by the growing strength of his scent as he was drawn by the ruckus.

Will tried to recall if he’d caught Hannibal’s scent in the hallway, but it permeated everything to such varying degrees and he couldn’t be sure if he had or hadn’t. The hands that had pushed him, too, he couldn’t quite recall being large or small, it had all happened so quickly.

Hannibal’s suite was right next to his, yet the servants in the attic had heard the commotion and responded before Hannibal had. Will stared at Hannibal and wondered with cold dread if his husband had found an opportunity yet again to deal with him as he had his first wife.

“Will?” Hannibal called, standing at the top of the stairs in his dressing gown and nightshirt, his hair mussed from sleep. He started down and Will tensed, earning himself a sharp, suspicious glance from Jimmy. “What on earth happened?”

“He’s nearly broken his neck!” Mina said, concern sharpening her voice to a knife’s edge. She turned on Hannibal, half blocking Will behind her as if to protect him.

“I was clumsy,” Will said, recalling the feel of quick hands pushing him. “I fell.”

“Fell? Down the stairs?” Hannibal asked, incredulous, bewildered by the whole episode and especially bewildered by Lady Rathmore’s trembling outrage.

Will stared up at him as if he was a deranged stranger and Hannibal could only look back at him in confusion, his concern doubling with the sight of a lump rising on Will’s pale forehead.

“He is shaken up, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, straightening and attempting to diffuse the tension when Will refused to answer.

“He woke half the house! How could you have slept through it?” Mina demanded, nostrils flaring and mouth taut. “He might have died, Lord Clarges! Little though you would care!”

“Mina,” Will sharply said, and winced with pain as Jimmy helped him to his feet, supporting him under his arm.

“Lady Rathmore, I am not in the mood to have a guest in this household shrieking at me in her nightclothes,” Hannibal said, the set-down coming out more sharply than he intended due to his concern, but at least hushing her wild accusations. “I will attribute that comment to an excess of nerves and forgive it.”

“Come along, Mr. Graham, let’s get you back to bed, shall we?”

“Let me examine him,” Hannibal said, true worry gnawing at him. The scent of Will’s fear agitated him, the sensation of it in his gut and chest waking a primal desire to comfort him. He wanted nothing more than to pluck the slender Omega from Jimmy’s grasp and carry him off someplace safely within reach.

Will’s fear spiked palpably when Hannibal reached for him and Hannibal immediately dropped his hand, alarmed by it. Will’s voice was thin and cold when he said, “No, thank you, Lord Clarges. I assure you, I am fine.”

“Will, you’ve just fallen down the stairs! You might’ve broken something!” Hannibal said, his mate’s resistance only making him more worried. This was not the first time Will had behaved and responded as if he was afraid, but never to this level of absolute terror and he could only put it down to what had just happened. “I understand your fall has frightened you,
but you might truly be badly hurt! Please allow me to examine you before you try to take the stairs, or else let me carry you up! You might have broken a bone, for the gods’ sake! At the very least, you’ve hit your head—"

“Leave him alone!” Mina said, nearly a shout, her fear more obvious than Will’s but no greater.

“Jimmy can see to me,” Will said, moving away when Hannibal stirred closer in response to his upset. “Do not touch me.”

Jimmy waited, looking anxiously from Will to Hannibal until Hannibal gave him a short, sharp nod, settling for saying, “Check him thoroughly Jimmy. If anything is broken, get me at once.”

It was immensely disturbing to see Jimmy and Mina helping Will up the stairs, knowing he was hurting. It was even more disturbing to think Will was quite tangibly frightened of him for no reason he could discern, and his mind could only find one answer as to why.

Duxbury. Melinda. The shadow of his first wife and the circumstances of her death that Hannibal, even in the face of Will’s distrust and fear, was at a loss or an opportunity to explain.

“My Lord!” Mrs. Henderson hurried his way, her white nightgown billowing around her slim ankles.

“There’s nothing there, m’Lord!” she whispered, casting a worried glance at Will as he hit the landing with Jimmy’s help, Mina lingering behind to glare daggers down at Hannibal before flouncing off in a huff. “Nothing at all!”

“He tripped over nothing and nearly killed himself rolling down the stairs?” Hannibal queried, worry gnawing at him. “He has never once been clumsy.”

“He seemed frightened, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, shielding his bare lamp from the breeze of their movements. “It is possible he tripped in the darkness.”

“What on earth was he about this time of night?!” Hannibal asked, deeply unsettled. He’d felt such a gut-wrenching stab of worry when he’d heard the commotion and seen Will mounded at the foot of the staircase like a discarded rag doll it still twinged in his stomach, sour and heavy. Thank the gods the noise had finally penetrated his heavy sleep, else he would have had no knowledge of the event at all.

“Perhaps that is a question best asked come breakfast, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, delicately pointing out it was late and no time for harsh feelings.

“Of course, yes, back to bed with you both,” Hannibal said, waving them off towards the servants’ stairs as he slowly made his way back to his suite. He lingered at the top of the stairs, searching the black-on-black darkness for any sign of what could have tripped Will into his fall but there was nothing he could see.

‘Clumsy,’ he’d said, and the air still smelled of his fear. It brought a rough, involuntary chuff from him, tugging him again to check on Will and ensure he was calm now, no longer so frightened or threatened.

‘It is natural,’ Bedelia had said, firm in her instruction of him in all sorts of surprising things. He wanted to go to him, to see if he could ease him as Bedelia had insisted was possible, to try establishing a connection and soothe the fear Hannibal had all but tasted on him.

He was not, however, such a cad that he could not recognize what Will would make of it—namely that he was taking advantage of his vulnerability. Unwilling to risk engendering any of Will’s righteous violence, Hannibal returned to his suite instead, knowing he would be awake, sleepless in his bed, until the wee hours of morning wondering how on earth he would manage to get closer to his mate when Will was so strangely, terribly frightened of him.

zzz

The aftershock of his fall left Will trembling as Jimmy and Mina eased him down onto his bed. The world seemed to sway sickeningly in one direction then the other, and he winced from the lamps as Jimmy lit them, every bone in his body protesting with each breath he took.

“Oh, my darling,” Mina whispered, sitting next to him to gently tease his hair from a place throbbing in time with his heartbeat. She grimaced as she did so, breathing, “A goose egg already, and you’ve bloodied it. Will, what happened?”

“Nothing,” Will said, knowing she could feel his agitation as keenly as her own. When Jimmy vanished into the washroom to gather supplies, he quickly whispered, “I was pushed, Mina.”

“Pushed?!” But dearest, you must—"
She cut off, casting a nervous glance at the doorway when Jimmy passed across to reach the cabinet. Lowering her voice to a bare purr, she said, "Will, you must tell someone."

Will shook his head just slightly, cringing against renewed discomfort. Swallowing hard against growing nausea, he managed, "No, Mina, please say nothing."

Jimmy returned and carefully cleaned up the few places on Will’s scalp still oozing blood, wincing as he did so.

“Well, no stitches required," he said, carefully dabbing some ointment on the open places. “So far so good, but no promises for tomorrow. Does anything feel really wrong? I’m no doctor, Mr. Graham, so I apologize for my ineptitude on this count."

“It’s fine, Jimmy, you needn’t examine me," Will breathed. “Hannibal was merely posturing before the servants.”

Jimmy frowned, regarding Will in silence before he said, “You really should have let Lord Clarges have a look.”

“How can you say such a thing?!” Mina asked, aghast, and nervously averted her gaze from Jimmy’s questioning glance.

Will said nothing. Through the crashing pain in his head he kept feeling hands pushing him, just like in his dream. And he’d fallen, hadn’t he? Fallen and been hurt, and the one who was supposed to protect him, to care for him, was in all likelihood the one who had pushed him.

“Mr. Graham,” Jimmy said, finishing up and mixing some headache powder into a glass of water for him. “Did something else happen?”

Mina tensed beside him, trembling to burst into an admission but wisely holding her tongue.

Will shook his head and immediately regretted it when his skull felt fit to fracture. Closing his eyes to allay his nausea, he whispered, “No, Jimmy. I fell.”

Jimmy sighed, pressing the glass into his hand.

“You can tell me, Mr. Graham,” he insisted. “If you’re frightened of Lord Clarges, I will make sure His Grace is made aware —”

“No,” Will sharply said, fingers clenching on the glass. Softening his tone, he said, “No, it isn’t that. I just fell, Jimmy. That’s all.”

The press of his mouth betrayed the fact that Jimmy knew he was lying and didn’t like it one bit, but he patted Will’s knee all the same and told him, “Well, drink that right up. It will help with the pain. Leave the glass on the nightstand, Mr. Graham, and I’ll get it come morning.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will said, barely more than a whisper.

“Goodness, the servants here are so familiar with their betters!” Mina said, glowering at Jimmy who, surprisingly, glowered right back. Wordlessly, he put out the other lights and left Will alone with Mina.

“We should write father,” Mina said the instant the door was closed, turning to take Will’s hands in hers.

“No.”

“But, Will, we must do something!” she hissed, glaring at the washroom door as if Hannibal might burst through and murder them both.

“Mina,” Will said, taking a deep breath. “Please, I just want to get rid of this terrible headache. I will not be done to death in my bed, I swear it.”

“You never imagined you would be done to death on your own stairs, either!” she flared, but after a long silence only pressed a kiss to his unhurt temple and said, “Very well. I’ll turn out these lamps, dearest, and you try to get some sleep.”

She rose gracefully and put out the remaining lamps, finding her way to the door in the faint moonlight. She paused there before leaving and told him, “I am only just beside you, Will. If you need me, call out.”
Will waited for the quiet click of the door and eased back into bed. He tried to go back to sleep but he found he couldn’t. Even after drinking the drugged water down, he lay awake wondering who that person was he’d seen fleeing downstairs. He could easily imagine it was the Widow Reynolds, attempting to skulk from the house, her purpose accomplished. He wondered if Hannibal had seen his opportunity and taken it, one forceful shove to end Will’s life and grant freedom to his own. It would not, according to Molly and Mina and the world at large, be the first time he would have done such, Will knew.

It chilled him to the depths of his soul and left him nervous and out of sorts. He abandoned all pretense of sleep and rose to dress with excruciating slowness, using only the bedside lamp so as not to call attention to himself. The servants would be up if they knew he was and he had no desire to bother them.

He took his small, mostly-shuttered lamp to light his way and crept out onto the landing again. It took him some pacing, but he found the creaky board that had alerted him to a presence. It was between his door and Hannibal’s, not beyond. Whoever it had been, they had come from the direction of Hannibal’s suite, or else further down the hall.

Will’s heart skipped, the beat of it echoing in his head, and he tamped his fear down firmly. It was an old acquaintance, after all, following him here from the house of his father and dogging his steps every day since his saddle had been cut. He would not allow himself to be controlled by it nor dissuaded by his instincts, which pushed him to seek safety with Hannibal. Squaring his shoulders and fighting the pain that threatened to break his skull, he went to the stairs, recalling his angle. Whoever had pushed him had come from the deeper darkness behind him. Unless two strangers had somehow broken into Hartford House in a bizarre attempt to harm him, it was likely the person who had pushed him was Hannibal.

Will’s breath left him on a shaky exhale and he took the stairs cautiously, clinging to the railing. It felt as if every joint in his body had been jostled loose, aching from the top of his head all the way to his knees, throbbing in time with his heartbeat. He couldn’t allow it to deter him, however. He resolutely caught his breath at the foot of the stairs and took stock, determined to figure at least part of this issue out.

The other person had fled somewhere when he’d called out to them. The stairs fed onto the main doors, the most likely escape. Will rallied and checked the locks by lamplight.

They were undone, the latches opened from the inside. Whoever they were, they had been here, inside the house before Mrs. Henderson or Mr. Hawkes had locked the doors for the night, and had fled through the front door in the confusion of Will’s fall.

Trembling, Will hastily locked the door again, leaving no sign of an intruder to alarm the servants. He knew there were any number of ways to gain access to a house this size during the day and it worried him. Had it not been Hannibal’s paramour, waltzed in on his arm in the dead of night, then it was someone with wicked intentions and no business being here. Grandfather’s suite was on the main floor; he would make a rather tempting target, Will knew, if he himself was not the intended victim.

Shaking off the feeling of hands shoving him, Will carried his little lamp downstairs to the darkened kitchen and made a small breakfast of dry bread and cold tea to accompany more of the headache powder Mrs. Pimms kept in the cupboard. He sat alone at the servants’ table in the meager light with oppressive darkness looming all around him, his thoughts turning to Hannibal.

He had applied himself to Hannibal’s perspective since that day his Omegan nature had latched onto the man as the ruling and most dangerous Alpha to be pleased. It had been less of a struggle to suppress his point of view these last six years, but with Hannibal so close so constantly it was all too easy for Will to see what would suit him best.

Unfortunately, that was himself dead and removed from his problematic position if all other methods failed. After all this time, he was surely impatient to move on with his life and Will was nothing more than an obstacle to be overcome. There was no consideration for his feelings or understanding that he even had them. There was no concern for him in the least—he was in the way, and all this talk of accepting him and giving him a child was simply a means to get close enough to easily push Will off the nearest cliff.

It was frighteningly, perfectly reasonable.

“Mr. Graham! Goodness, you’re up early, considering!” Mrs. Pimms declared, up and dressed and ready to start the morning meal for the servants who would soon rise. “Ah, you should’ve rang for me!”
It’s perfectly fine, Mrs. Pimms,” he said, rising slowly to leave his barely-eaten bread on the table as she moved about lighting lamps. “I couldn’t sleep. I’m sorry for invading your kitchen yet again.”

“Pft, invading!” she laughed, sweeping the plate away. “Mr. Graham, after the night you had, you’re due a little sleeplessness, and you’re always welcome in your own kitchen, by rights.”

“You heard?” Will asked, barely above a mute whisper.

“Mr. Hawkes informed us,” she said over the sounds of the house awakening, servants milling, boots clicking on wooden floors, voices raised in whispered conversation as they filed downstairs. “Everyone woke at the hubbub and you know how he hates gossip!”

“Mrs. Pimms, I—Mr. Graham! This is unexpected!” Mr. Hawkes said, drawing up to a halt with a spill of maids coursing around him like water around a stone. “Are you unwell, Mr. Graham? Should I fetch Lord Clarges?”

“No, Mr. Hawkes, that won’t be necessary,” Will assured him, making room for Mrs. Pimms’ assistants as they started their morning chores. “But I would like to ask if you could be vigilant for new faces coming in below stairs.”

“New faces, Mr. Graham?” he echoed, a frown falling over his somber face. “Lady Rathmore arrived with only her lady’s maid, Ms. Speck, I believe, and, of course, Mr. Dolarhyde.”

“I have an uneasy feeling, Mr. Hawkes, there have been individuals in Hartford House who have no true business here,” Will said, feeling increasingly like a madman as he spoke, a sentiment Mr. Hawkes was too dignified to allow to show on his face.

“I will, of course, inform the staff to be alert,” Mr. Hawkes said, indulging his requests as he must.

“Thank you, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, and made the laborious return trip upstairs where he supposedly belonged, wondering how on earth he could protect himself against an Alpha who saw him as nothing more than a weed to be plucked out by the root.

It was that thought which decided him and brought him to his little desk in his suite to write to his father’s solicitor, Mr. Brauner.

In short, concise sentences, he explained everything that had happened and instructed Mr. Brauner to gather an accounting of his assets and all material worth. He wrote they should be given to Mina if anything was to happen to him, and she should use those funds to discover the truth of what might have happened to him.

‘I am in a very precarious position,’ he said in closing. ‘I rely on your silence in this case, Mr. Brauner. No one in my family should be bothered by this unless I come to an untimely and suspicious end.’

Will’s hands shook as he folded it into an envelope and sealed it against inquiry. It relieved him somewhat to have someone else in possession of what he had learned. Should anything happen to him, at least Mina would be able to find out the truth of it.

He took the letter downstairs, panting softly against rising nausea, and headed directly for the door, starting like he’d been caught stealing when Mr. Hawkes politely inquired from behind him, “May I take that for you, Mr. Graham?”

“No,” Will clutched the letter to his chest protectively, embarrassed by the clear concern he saw on Mr. Hawkes’ face at his strange behavior. He felt heat in his cheeks and sweat break out on his brow, enough that Mr. Hawkes’ somber face fell into lines of concern. He cleared his throat and said with practiced calm, “No, thank you, Mr. Hawkes. I thought I might ride down to town and post it myself.”

“You do not look at all well, Mr. Graham. It would be less trouble for you if I send a footman—”

“No, Mr. Hawkes, thank you,” Will said, his smile tight and tense as he tucked the letter out of reach. “I will take it myself. I’m rather at loose ends now that I’ve been removed from my position.”

“You have not been removed from your position,” Hannibal said, his deep voice sounding as he came downstairs. “You are assuming your proper position, Will.”

“And rightly so, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes confirmed, nodding sagely, extraordinarily pleased.

Hannibal moved towards him, fluidly graceful and strong, and the tug Will felt towards him from their bond brought an answering flood of fear and something else that felt frighteningly like the stirrings of his heat, though it was still too early by Will’s counting.
Hannibal cocked his head, sensing it, his deep frown pulling on Will like a hook in a trout, bringing a fresh flush to his cheeks.

“You’re up early,” Will said, forcing himself to ignore the persistent dull throb in his head, the worsening ache spreading through his body from his fall.

“The military makes one an early riser,” Hannibal said, his concern growing as he looked at Will. “I thought I might go for my ride. On any other day, I would ask if you’d care to join me, but you really don’t look well, Will. Not surprising, all things considered. I do wish you would permit me to examine you. I’m certain you are not as hale as you believe you are.”

“My apologies, Lord Clarges, but I was heading into town,” Will said, wincing when the throbbing in his head took umbrage at his speaking, the pounding of it holding pace with his quickening heartbeat.

Hannibal noted how pale he seemed, and told him, “Will, I truly advise against it. You took quite a fall last night and I don’t think you should be riding.”

“I’m fine,” Will said, desperate to finish his task. “It is only to the village and back, not clear across the country.”

“Then I will ride with you,” Hannibal decided, Will’s reactions to his injuries lifting an irresistible urge to care for him, watch over him, keep him safe from harm. Hannibal didn’t know if the instinct was due to his being an Alpha or a physician and he honestly didn’t care—his mate was hurting, perhaps badly injured, and he needed to be near in case Will needed him. “I will not stand for you tumbling from your mare and injuring yourself further, nor do I want you to be found unconscious on the roadside.”

“No doubt if I were, those who found me would consider it merely an Omega’s foolishness and deliver me back to my proper owner,” Will said, bitter with the harsh truth of his life. “Mr. Hawkes, please have Mr. Dolarhyde meet me out front. He can accompany me to town in case my weakness overcomes me.”

“Hawkes, you’ll do nothing of the sort,” Hannibal immediately countered, informing Will, “I am not allowing a man I have no knowledge of—let alone another Alpha—escort my spouse into town! There has been quite enough gossip regarding this family, as I have become painfully and thoroughly aware! The only thing overcoming you right now is that crack to your head, Will; weakness plays no part in it!”

Glowering at Hannibal, Will made for the front door hastily enough that Mr. Hawkes was not in time to sweep it open for him. The world quivered dangerously at the edges of his vision, but Will put one foot in front of the other with stiff-backed determination, heading straight for the stables.

“Will, I know for a fact you aren’t feeling well if you’re confounding the staff.” Hannibal’s voice followed him out into the brightening morning. His long-legged stride caught him up to Will in moments. “Hawkes nearly had an apoplexy at the sight of you getting the door yourself. He thinks you abused having had to do so.”

“He needn’t concern himself to such an extent,” Will assured him, brushing past the startled stable lads and Peter, Hartford House’s diffident groom, to reach his mare’s box. Her ears were perked, already swiveled to the sound of his voice, and her bright, eager eyes eased his upset somewhat. “I have been put to much harder use than opening a door.”

“Peter,” Hannibal said, noting he looked torn between wanting to interfere and wanting to escape. “Please fetch your Lordship’s gear, so he may not be abused on that count. And mind that you check it! I want no more accidents befalling my spouse!”

Will bristled but did not nay say him. Impressed that he held his tongue, Hannibal said, “Thank you for not arguing.”

“Peter is sensitive to unpleasantness, as well you should know,” Will said, slipping into the mare’s box to lean against her neck and hide his face, already exhausted but not about to admit he was feeling dizzy and doubted his own ability to saddle his mare in his worsening state. “Contradicting you would only have upset him.”

“Such a thoughtful master you are,” Hannibal mused, frowning. Will still carried the scent of fear, but it was overridden by his pain. Hannibal could feel his awareness of it growing, plucking at his nerves. Frowning, he patted his stallion’s nose, reaching out for its outstretched muzzle and avoiding its nibbling teeth from force of long habit.

“I am not the master here, Hannibal. I never have been,” Will said, glad to have his mare’s solid, sturdy body between him and the man he simply could not trust. “I am merely a placeholder.”

“Will, you are married to a man who will eventually hold a precious title,” Hannibal reminded him. “You are no placeholder.”
“That is not what your social circle believes,” Will said, pressing his forehead to the mare’s warm neck, careful of the lump that had grown larger in the hours since his fall. “Nor what you have admitted. I am not welcome, or wanted, or needed here. I have only been a troublesome guest for the past six years. The staff have been kind enough to take care of me.”

“Take care of you? They have hardly seen you!” Hannibal said, preparing to address the subject of Will’s fall last night and, perhaps, open the way to telling him about Melinda. Before he could imagine a graceful way to do so, however, Peter and the stable boys returned with their gear.

Will took his chance to escape the uncomfortable conversation by allowing Peter to saddle his mare while he retreated to the yard, using any excuse not to look at his husband. He grew cold thinking about how provoking he had been, his frustration and the after effects of his fall pushing him past the bounds of common sense. It was not wise, he knew, to needle a man who wished to kill him.

Peter finished quickly and led the mare out into the growing sunlight, holding her bridle and soothing her when Will tried to mount. He could barely get his foot into the stirrup for the hurt it caused, and swallowed back a harsh cry at the scream of refusal from his back when he tried to pull up.

Peter, worried and uncertain, ended up boosting him into the saddle, casting anxious looks back at the stable as if willing Hannibal to emerge and put a halt to it.

Will settled in his saddle and for a chilling moment he was sure he would slide from the mare’s back onto his face. The world tipped and swayed and his head hurt from the top of his skull in a flare of fire all the way down to his pelvis. It took every bit of his formidable willpower to remain upright.

It was the sound of Hannibal’s voice that prompted him to move despite his injuries. Without waiting to consider the consequences, Will urged the mare onto the lane and gave her her head, the chill morning air cooling his flushed cheeks and mitigating the nausea his horse’s movements caused.

There was a thunder of hoof beats behind him and a glance over his shoulder showed him Hannibal bent over the stallion’s neck, crop flat to his side, urging the horse to stretch its long legs. It sent a deep jolt of terror through him and Will’s mare nickered, responding by stretching her own gait. Will leaned over her neck and held on for dear life, his usual ease abandoning him to stiffness and pain, leaving him clinging to her back. He prayed he wouldn’t be sick down her neck, and he prayed Hannibal wouldn’t run him down on the lane where no witnesses would see what might befall him.

His mare picked up on his anxiety and hastened her pace, straining into a full-blown run. She was shorter than Hannibal’s horse and didn’t have as much speed in a sprint, but she easily outdistanced the high-spirited stallion’s short-lived burst of speed, only losing her lead when they hit the outskirts of Hartford Town.

She slowed, unused to such concentrated effort, and Will cautiously pushed upright, hoping he was safe enough with the town’s waking eyes to see them. He patted her damp neck with appreciation, releasing a shaky breath of relief when the cool air soothed his heated skin and the nausea his horse’s movements caused.

Hannibal overshot him, slowed, and circled back, flushed with the cool air, the picture of a virile Alpha in good health. He seemed in tolerable spirits, Will irritably noted. But then, he had every reason to be, considering how close he’d come to killing Will last night. It was dangerous to be alone with him, mortally dangerous, and Will had the lump on his skull to prove it.

“You shouldn’t have ridden so recklessly, Will,” Hannibal said, concern overcoming him, his stallion’s hide steaming in the cool air. “What if you’d fallen unconscious? You might have been killed.”

“I am unfortunately resilient,” Will said, giving him wide berth to continue towards town, almost unable to keep his seat. “As my various accidents and my father can attest.”

“Your father?” Hannibal asked, the oddness of including a man Will rarely, if ever spoke of overridden by his worry when Will listed sharply and only just caught himself. “Were you prone to accidents as a child?”

Will hesitated, his breathing shallow. When Hannibal’s stare sharpened, he merely said, “Yes.”

“Strange,” Hannibal said, treading lightly in his attempts to engage him as Will was in pain and nervous of him, that same fear from last night rearing its ugly head. “You have never once displayed a lack of grace, Will, yet you say you are accident prone and only just fell down our stairs and nearly broke your neck.”
“I am sorry to have deceived you yet again, Lord Clarges, but I am exceptionally clumsy,” Will said, taking a ragged breath and swallowing against the urge to be sick. “My father is a saint for his patience with me.”

“I had imagined he held you quite dear,” Hannibal said, falling in next to him as they rode towards the awakening town, alert in case Will did slide from his saddle. “The only son in a family of females.”

Will skated a sideways glance at him, swaying more from his dizziness than his mare’s gait. The ache in his head and down his back made him short in his answers and his voice was sharp when he said, “I was never the son he deserved, Lord Clarges.”

“Still, I cannot imagine he was very pleased with your reception here, or the fact you took over as land agent,” Hannibal said, unabashedly fishing for information on the man who had refused correspondence from his newly-married son. He angled more than one worried glance at Will, concerned by his obvious discomfort and distress. The doctor in him wanted to put a stop to this nonsensical ride this instant, but the newly-informed Alpha in him hesitated to do so.

“To the contrary, I am sure he was quite pleased. It is his philosophy that useless things are only fit for burning,” Will said, closing his blue eyes down to slits as the sun intruded to further agitate his stomach. “Father insisted I apply myself to learning the intricacies of running an estate.”

“He imagined he would one day leave his own in your charge?” Hannibal inquired, imagining how besotted Will’s father must have been with him if he thought to challenge inheritance laws which treated Omegas the same as women. But it made little sense when compared to what Hawkes had said about the Earl being unpleasant to Will. Whatever the case may be, he clearly had not raised Will with any great affection, though Hannibal could not imagine why on earth he had restrained himself from doing so.

“Heavens, no,” Will said, huffing a soft, scornful laugh, moving his mare away from Hannibal’s mount, keeping enough distance between them to stay out of his reach. His circumstances drove him to impulsively say, “No, Lord Clarges. He knew I had no prospects for marriage and would need a livelihood if I did not wish to starve on the street.”

Hannibal was slightly taken aback by his statement, sure he had not heard correctly. “Why would your father think you had no prospects?”

“I was unfortunately born both unattractive and Omegan,” Will said without rancor, and a sharp glance showed Hannibal he was not uncharacteristically fishing for compliments. “After seven sisters, there was no money left to promise a dowry that could adequately compensate for the burden of my care. The best I could hope for was to earn my living. He was never hopeful I would manage to attract a mate or have a family, but he did the best he could for me under the circumstances, which was to see to my education.”

“That is entirely perplexing,” Hannibal murmured, decidedly aware Will was anything but plain or unattractive and wondering how his father had managed to convince him it was so, or why he would bother doing so.

He nudged his horse slightly closer to Will’s mare when his mate slumped in his saddle, wincing. He hesitated, wanting nothing more than to ease him down from his mare and examine him, but in Will’s current state of hurt and agitation, he knew he only risked being cossed for his concern. He settled instead for speaking, keeping Will focused on staying upright, and said, “I had always imagined you spent your days at your father’s side being coddled and doted upon.”

“You mistake me for one of my sisters,” Will softly said, a sad frown bowing his mouth when he thought of his father and how dearly he loved his many daughters. Figuring his husband would praise his father’s dogma, he swallowed back his growing sickness and said, “Coddling is dangerous for Omegas. It encourages weakness and dependence. It terrified him to think I would be enslaved by my biology. He used strong measures to ensure I would not be.”

“Well,” Hannibal said, digesting what he’d been told, his measure of Will’s father finding sharp new corners that cut a much different picture than he’d always held. Yet, he could not tell Will’s feeling for his father. His husband seemed defensive of his father, spouting rhetoric Hannibal saw the ugly shadow of himself within. Hoping not to offend Will any more than he already had, he could only offer, “He must love you very much to take such pains on your behalf.”

“Pain is the very cornerstone of his love for me,” Will said, the words bitter and harsh, dislodged from him in an excess of physical discomfort despite the presence of Hannibal so near him. “I was not always sure I would survive it.”

The sobering seriousness in the way Will spoke gave him goose-flesh, made him wonder just what relationship Will had with his father that would make him honestly think he might not survive it.
Hannibal swallowed hard to force down the strengthening sense of unease Will had given him. He looked at his spouse, who seemed terribly fragile and terribly damaged there in the early morning sunlight, pale and clearly ill, his tired blue eyes ringed in dark circles, the lump on his head purple-red and angry.

“Will,” he said, drawing his stallion to a stop, Will’s mare pausing alongside him. “I cannot dance around this subject one moment longer and I cannot hope to guess your feelings in this matter. Will, tell me plainly, was your father... was he unkind to you?”

Will looked over at him, his blue eyes moiling with misery and deep, profound distress before they glazed over, giving Hannibal nothing more than the reflection of his own stern face.

“He was the only Alpha who cared for me,” Will said, his voice faint and resigned and filled with a deadly kind of calm Hannibal knew all too well from the battlefield, and it chilled him to his soul. “He would not have been unkind or cruel for no reason.”

“Therefore, the obvious answer is that you gave him reason?” Hannibal asked, rapidly coming to the conclusion he immensely disliked Will’s father, if only because of the way Will reacted at the mere mention of him.

“I suppose I must have,” Will said, relieved they had stopped moving, though the world still swayed dangerously and he had tiny little spots dancing at the edges of his vision that in no way aided his equilibrium. He sat half-hunched in his saddle, burning with heat and regretting his rash decision to deliver the letter himself. There was every possibility he would end up in the ditch by the side of the road, perhaps not even due to Hannibal putting him there.

“Will... I am not your father,” Hannibal said, realizing his spouse’s family dynamic had not been at all what he once imagined and he may never have the truth of it. “Not all Alphas are the same.”

Will stared at him for a long, silent moment, long enough Hannibal cautiously asked him, “What? What is it?”

“Not all Alphas are the same?” Will asked, and offered a mirthless laugh, the statement so absurd under the circumstances that he couldn’t restrain himself, despite his survival sense warning him to tread with caution. “Yet all Omegas are. I wonder how that could be.”

“Will—”

“I have known my father and I have known you, Hannibal,” Will said, overriding him. “Suffice it to say, the majority of my experience is that you are the same in the most dangerous of ways.”

Hannibal paled, uncomfortable to be categorized by Will in the same company as the man who had so clearly mistreated him.

“I find myself curious, Lord Clarges, how you will treat the child you insist I give you,” Will said, his eyes open only enough to fix on Hannibal, picking him apart and finding him lacking. “Beaten for the smallest infraction? Gagged for laughing, perhaps? Would you break your son’s fingers for touching things he should not?”

Utterly horrified and shocked, Hannibal said, “Of course not! What an appalling thing to say, Will! No one in their right mind would treat a child in such a way! Why would you even think of such things? Did he do such to you, Will?”

“It isn’t my place to say. Blame it on my imagination, Hannibal,” Will said, looking away so Hannibal would not read the illness and wretched sadness rapidly overcoming him. He felt out of resources, at the end of his strength and wits, vulnerable and friendless and with so little left to lose he wondered why he’d ever bothered to protect it. “It is, I’ve been told, my greatest fault.”

“Honestly, who would speak of such horrors?” Hannibal breathed, grimacing at the images Will’s words had conjured. He could feel agitation vibrating from his mate, a physical pain he clenched his teeth against the force of. Vastly disturbed, he said, “You can safely assume I would never do any of those things, if it even needs to be said. Any Lecter heir will know a life of contentment, I assure you. A proper son is the point to all of this, after all.”

“A proper son,” Will echoed, and laughed again, harsh and unhappy and grim.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, wondering at his emphasis, at his strange behavior and a fearful something from Will he could sense that felt too close to despair. “That is what the two of us are required to provide my family, after all. I do not need another daughter. One is quite enough.”
“You speak of children so easily,” Will said, disturbed to an unsettling degree and driven to fearless imprudence with the force of his hurt. “Pretending your forced attempts to know me for your grandfather’s sake are in pursuit of an heir when we both know well enough what you truly intend.”

“Will, what do you think I intend?” Hannibal asked, noting how upset Will was, so tense, in fact, his mare sidestepped, which irritated his own mount. “Will! If you mean my goading about bringing my daughter here, let me assure you I have absolutely no intentions of doing something so callous!”

Will’s mare tossed her head and Will nearly lost his seat, and that decided Hannibal, who said with an Alpha throb in his voice, “You are being foolish, Will, and I am putting a stop to this right now! You’re coming down from there if I have to drag you kicking and screaming, which I am sure you are still up for despite your terrible state.”

“Don’t you dare!” Will warned him, clinging to the saddle, his breath hitching when the mare skittered to one side of the lane.

“I have no idea what on earth has gotten into you, but it is high time we settle this—” Hannibal moved to reach Will, who jerked the mare’s reins with uncharacteristic roughness, causing her to rapidly turn, the words ‘settle this’ echoing in his mind.

“Will! For the gods’ sake, have a care!”

Will leaned over the mare’s neck, the motion causing him to teeter on the cusp of actual sickness. He sensed Hannibal coming closer and snarled, “Stay away from me!”

Startled, Hannibal hesitated, Will’s jittery fear and obvious hurt like a punch in his gut. Despite the warning, he couldn’t help but try to get closer, concerned his mate might slide from the mare’s back to the ground.

The sturdy little horse protested Will’s treatment of her, unused to such handling, and broke into a trot back towards Hartford House and the soothing affection she knew waited for her there.

Will scrambled to sit upright, the world spinning and his heart thundering. He was terrified he would fall again, terrified Hannibal would keep questioning him, would force him down and throttle him right there on the lane and settle things after all.

“Will!” Hannibal shouted, deftly turning his mount in pursuit, rushing to reach him before he could fall as he had before. He overtook him and managed to grasp the mare’s bridle, slowing them both to a stop. “Will, what in the seven hells is going through your mind right now? You could have been killed!”

“Isn’t that what you’re after?! Will flared, pulling the mare’s head away and breaking Hannibal’s grip.

“What I’m after? Will—”

Will listed to one side and Hannibal caught his arm to steady him.

“Don’t you dare touch me!” Will snarled, eyes wide, fear rolling off of him in metallic waves. The scent and taste of it hit Hannibal with the force of a cannonball, overriding him with an instinctive, aggressive need to shield Will from what threatened him. The unexpected shift in his mate was so abrupt Hannibal was breathless with it. Before he could react to the change, Will’s other hand whipped around, his crop snapping across Hannibal’s cheek in a white-hot flare of pain.

Hannibal jerked back in mingled shock and hurt, hand lifting to touch his cheek where blood was already beginning to well from the cut, his stallion sidestepping and loosing an unhappy whinny.

Will panted, cheeks flushed, eyes showing whites all around as if he was consumed with absolute terror. As much as Hannibal wanted to question him, the plunging depths of Will’s fear made him realize something was very, very wrong.

“Will—”

“Don’t touch me!” Will hissed again, the horse dancing beneath him in agitation. “You are not my Alpha!”

“Will!” he said again, calling out as the young Omega rode off like the Devil himself was after him, trailing the scent of terror and a strange, warm sweetness much stronger than his usual faint, sugary scent.

Chapter 20

Will’s form was a small smudge in the distance by the time Hannibal collected himself enough to head home, terrified he would find his spouse lifeless in the lane along the way, sick and frightened as he was.
The staff assured him Will had, indeed, made it home in one piece, though he was so ill Mr. Price and Francis had taken him upstairs at once, according to Mr. Hawkes’ agitated recounting. It left Hannibal vastly relieved on that count, at least, knowing Will had made it home and was in good hands.

Grandfather caught sight of him as he came in and wheeled towards him from the east wing, shouting, “What on earth have you done to him now? You should be horsewhipped!”

“Will saw to that already,” Hannibal wearily said, concerned by the state Will was in.

“Ha! Serves you right, you ingrate!” Grandfather scolded, angry. “Someone needs to take that arrogance down a few pegs!”

Hannibal scowled at him and took the stairs two at a time, Grandfather calling admonishments up after him. He could smell the faint, foul stink of Francis Dolarhyde on the landing and it ratcheted his agitation higher, the presence of the other Alpha a threat Hannibal could barely stomach. It was all he could do not to barge his way into Will’s suite and get some answers, but that would do more harm than good, he knew. Will was in Jimmy’s faithful hands and that was, perhaps, the best thing for both of them right now.

He slammed into his room instead, stripping his jacket and waistcoat off, still shocked at how Will had flogged him away as if he’d been in mortal danger.

‘You could have been killed!’
‘Isn’t that what you’re after?!’

Terror. The scent-memory of it prickled Hannibal’s sinuses, his heart rate picking up and his stomach tightening. Will’s violence had always intrigued Hannibal, but even he knew Will striking someone with a riding crop was the last resort of a desperate kind of fear. He’d stank of blind fright and a sweet, elusive *something* that had acted like icy water on Hannibal’s own reactions.

Something about him made his mate fear for his life and the fault, he knew, lay in himself. He had never taken the time to know Will, had never attempted to befriend an Omega or understand one—he was essentially as unschooled in Omegas as a toddling babe, his father’s concubine and Bedelia’s instruction notwithstanding. All he really knew was he had somehow goaded his mate into lashing out on the lane.

And he needed to know why.

A mute knock at the door admitted Berger, silent and leery and clearly expecting to find him in a temper.

“Fetch my bag down,” Hannibal ordered him, moving to the mirror to inspect the damage Will had done.

It would scar, he knew, this livid, bruised and bloodied mark on his cheek. He was lucky Will had only used force enough to check him, else the damage might have cost him an eye. But he could hardly begrudge him, considering the scars he had left on Will. Marks on the heart showed in different ways than those on the skin, but were, Hannibal knew, no less painful a reminder of the injury that caused them.

Hannibal looked thoughtfully at the closed door to the washroom, aware of the faint sounds of water as his mate moved within and the light tones of Jimmy’s voice as he assisted his master. It reminded Hannibal of when he’d burst in on Will and surprised him from the tub. He’d been as delicate and beautiful then as he’d been ablaze with righteous indignation and outrage on his horse, wielding his crop like a soldier with a saber, but no less beautiful.

Beautiful but terrified all the same.

“Would you like me to stitch you?” Berger offered.

“I would like to start this day over entirely!” Hannibal sighed. “Inform Jimmy that I wish to have a discussion with Will when he is dressed.”

He dearly hoped by then they both would be a little more calm.

“In his suite, m’Lord or your own?”

“He can choose, it’s no matter to me, but tell him I wish to speak with him immediately,” Hannibal said, shooing Berger out on his way.

Trembling with the loss of the adrenaline that had flooded him, he collected his supplies from his bag and returned to the mirror, grateful for the pain of washing and repairing the wound on his cheek that forced him to pull himself back under control, to recall Will’s condition and how he’d behaved.
Broken ribs, perhaps. Bruised, at least, and definitely a concussion. He knew too well how brutal even one of those could be, let alone a combination. He chafed to examine Will and settle his mind there was nothing terribly wrong, to have a chance to speak to him about what had happened, to hear him give voice to his fears so Hannibal could address them.

He took a deep breath and snipped off the thread before inspecting the small, tidy stitches holding his tanned skin together.

He carefully put his tools away, only half aware of Will in the washroom, only half aware his anxiety for his mate was tuning his senses towards him. But when the faint slosh of water was accompanied by a pained, nearly inaudible noise of distress, that very awareness sent Hannibal bursting through the door before his mind caught up with his immediate response.

Will, teetering in an attempt to get out of the tub, immediately dropped back into the sudsy water up to his chin, his blue eyes wide and alarmed and fixed on Hannibal with sharp anxiety. His voice came out with a harsh, sharp edge when he said, "Do not come any closer, Lord Clarges!"

"I heard you cry out," Hannibal said, guilt clawing at his gut when Will looked up at him, blue eyes wide with mingled fear and fury. "You're dizzy, aren't you? And it's getting worse?"

"Please, leave me alone," Will said, his breathing shallow as he fought the nausea his abrupt movement had inspired, the walls of the washroom seeming to tilt and run together quite alarmingly.

"And let you lose consciousness in the bath?" Hannibal asked, grim. "I will embarrass both of us before I allow that, Will."

"Hannibal, I am warning you—"

"Considering there is little within reach you can fling at me," Hannibal said, kicking the small bathing stool over to settle on it next to the tub, "I believe this is my opportunity to expect you to behave rationally and get some answers."

Will's cheeks colored and he glowered, wrinkling his small, perfect nose and once more lamenting the lack of locks on the doors. "You can hardly be said to have behaved rationally where I am concerned! I sought a hot bath to find some relief, Lord Clarges! Do not mitigate what little headway I've made by badgering me! Get out."

He tensed in the tub, aching muscles screaming their reluctance, but he was not about to take any chances, vulnerable position that he was in. Hannibal, for all he knew, might just take it into his head to hold him under until the bubbling stopped and be done with it at last. Settle things, as he'd put it.

"When I said you might've been killed, you responded by asking if it wasn't what I was after—why would you say such a thing? Why were you so frightened of me?" Hannibal demanded, entirely ignoring the jibe, all grace and good manners abandoned to the Alpha urge to unearth the source of this problem and deal with it. He tasted Will's fear like ash on his tongue, the sharp scent of it strengthening despite his being immersed in water, and said, "No, allow me to amend that, why are you so frightened of me?"

"I am not—"

"Don't you dare lie to me now when you never have before," Hannibal said, cutting him off. "I want the truth of it, Will. You were terrified of me. So terrified, in fact, that you whipped me with your crop—something I know even a violent termagant such as yourself would normally hesitate to do! Did you honestly believe I was going to hurt you?"

"You grabbed me! I have no idea what you are capable of," Will told him, stiff with tension. His hands rose to grip the sides of the tub, knuckles turning white with force as if bracing for an attack. "I only know what you have shown me."

"Which has not been kindness?" Hannibal finished for him, chuffing a short, sharp bark of unhappy laughter. He spied Jimmy peeking in through the washroom door, but the valet closed it again under Hannibal's dark glare. "Will, I am being entirely serious with you. I want to know what I have done to make you so fearful of me!"

Will looked down at the water, the goose egg lump on his forehead painfully stark where his wet hair parted around it. Not all of the tension around his mouth and eyes came from his fear, Hannibal knew. He was in a good deal of pain and Hannibal wanted nothing more than to soothe it from him.

"Will," he said again, softening his tone, wishing he could convey his sincerity to his spouse as bonded couples were said to do. "Please... you spoke of my intentions towards you. Have I given you some reason to believe I mean you harm?"

"Shall I list the ways in which you have shown yourself a less than caring spouse?" Will asked, his blue eyes lifting slowly with great respect for the worsening headache he risked. "Or even remind you that you have treated me abominably?"
“My memory is not lacking in that respect, Will. I am aware of how badly I’ve treated you,” Hannibal said, having the good grace to blush. “Yet, I’ve hardly threatened to kill you.”

Will’s eyes rounded and he drew into a little ball of outraged fury that made Hannibal stare at him with growing shock.

“Will,” he pressed, unable to believe his young spouse had reason to think he might actually do him deadly harm. “When have I ever threatened your life?”

Will’s chin tipped up, familiar stubborn tenacity rising to the fore. With a tone that spoke of resignation to circumstances, Will said, “You told His Grace, ‘Take him off of my hands before I arrange an accident for him.’ My first night under your roof when you were forced to share a table with me.”

It was Hannibal’s turn to be speechless. He gaped at Will, who gazed up at him with glittering assessment in his dark blue eyes, and he uttered a sharp, aghast laugh at how foolish it was, how ridiculously misplaced Will’s fears were.

“What a lot of silly nonsense,” he decided, shaking his head, another harsh, unhappy laugh escaping him. “Where has this come from so suddenly? Will, you’re far too intelligent to make a mountain out of that particular molehill! I was speaking out of anger! Six years have passed since then! You can’t expect me to accept that could make you believe I would actually kill you, Will. Honestly—”

“There was nothing at all laughable or accidental about cutting the girth strap on my saddle!” Will said, the pain in his sharp tone bringing Hannibal’s scolding to a cold halt. “Nor in pushing me down the stairs!”

Hannibal let the implications of that sink in. He stared at Will, who seemed very small and very vulnerable, braced in the bath as if expecting he might not ever leave it alive, his blue eyes large and mournful in his flushed, lovely face, the wet tips of his curls dripping water down his cheeks.

“Excuse me, what did you just say?” Hannibal managed to ask, the words a breathless, shocked whisper.

“Why pretend it didn’t happen?” Will asked, his bare throat tight with tension and his full mouth curving in a smile absolutely divorced from happiness. It was rueful and broken and Hannibal never wanted to see such an expression on his face ever again. Ever. “We both know my girth strap was tampered with the day I fell in the hopes I would break my neck, and you know as well as I do that I didn’t trip down those stairs.”

Heat flooded Hannibal’s veins and he surged to his feet, protective anger swelling in him fit to make him burst. It did not escape his notice that Will flinched from him, no doubt thinking he would drown him there in the tub.

“Will,” he said, struggling to contain his growing upset and anger. “Are you telling me someone sabotaged your saddle?”

“You hardly need to be told such a thing!” Will shot back, the heat of his bathwater flushing his skin. “You barely waited a full day before trying to kill me!”

“I did nothing of the sort!” Hannibal bellowed, horrified. “Why in the seven hells would you even believe such a thing? What on earth gave you that idea?”

“I received a letter claiming to have been privy to the attempt!” Will said, pressed back into the deeper end of the tub both to hide his nudity beneath the cloudy water and make it harder for Hannibal to force him under. “And Matthew showed me the girth strap! I could see for myself it had been cut.”

“Cut?” Hannibal echoed,swiping his hand down his face, pacing like a caged animal with the force of his growing agitation. “Why would I have ever done such a thing? When would I have ever done such a thing?”

“You tell me!” Will snarled, Hannibal’s forceful Alpha posturing filling him, as if his husband’s anger belonged to him. Perhaps it did belong to him, some portion of it. He certainly felt angry, felt enraged, felt ready to shout back just as fiercely as he was shouted at.

Let no one ever say Will Graham went down without a fight.

“You have loathed me from the day you set eyes on me!” Will reminded him. “It is not entirely outside of the realm of possibility that you have twice tried to kill me! But I warn you now, Hannibal, the third time you had better make certain you succeed or I will not answer for what happens next!”

“There will be no third time!” Hannibal shouted, the throbbing Alpha undertone of his deep voice bouncing off of the decorative tin ceiling and reverberating through Will’s chest. He swung around and pinned Will with incredulous amber eyes, such perfect horror written in their depths that Will almost questioned himself. “There was never a single time!”

He took a dragging breath, struggling to control himself, and Will mirrored him, panting and tense.
“Even were I the kind of man who could coldly murder an innocent person in my home,” Hannibal said, a harsh thread of true fear ringing in his voice like the somber tone of a church bell. “I did not sabotage your saddle and I most certainly did not push you down the stairs! I sleep like the gods’ own dead, Will! Had the servants not come pounding down the hall, I might not have woken at all!”

“If it wasn’t you, then who?” Will demanded, challenging him, his smaller Omegan fangs bared in a snarl. “I saw whoever was there in your room, Hannibal! I called after them and they ran. When I started to follow, you came from the shadows pushed me.”

Hannibal stopped pacing abruptly, asking, “Whoever was in my room? You think I had someone with me? Absolutely not. Whoever you saw outside of your room—”

“Outside of your room,” Will corrected, bewildered by Hannibal’s reactions. He could feel pure, unadulterated, protective rage swelling through his bond to Hannibal, so great, in fact, it was almost overpowering. It was as if every word he spoke merely goaded Hannibal to greater upset. Upset that seemed, strangely enough, to be on Will’s behalf.

It threw Will off kilter and that only worried him all the more, thinking his bond might be twisting his perception to favor Hannibal when he should do nothing of the sort.

“I cannot believe what I am hearing,” Hannibal said, horrified. “I honestly cannot believe what you are telling me.”

Will took advantage of Hannibal’s pacing to pull the plunger from the tub and reach for a bathing sheet as the cloudy water drained.

“No, you are not a liar!” Hannibal said, a dark laugh escaping him. “If there is one thing in this world I can rely on, Will, it’s your brutal honesty. What I cannot believe is that you have kept this to yourself! Someone has tried twice to kill you and I cannot even try to protect you because you have said nothing! Even knowing there had been one attempt already to kill you, you still found it behooven upon yourself to confront an intruder in our home! Why for the sake of all the gods?”

“I have never had reason to fear for my safety inside of my own house before,” Will responded, the sharp edge of his anger subsiding as Hannibal’s panic receded, the smallest kernel of doubt taking hold. “Why shouldn’t I go check when I hear someone creeping about in the hall?”

“It did not even occur to you to wake me?” Hannibal asked, pausing in his pacing to pin Will with a glare, his hackles rising at the idea of a stranger being in his home, in his territory, within threatening distance of his—

“Well, certainly, had you been sleepwalking when you shoved me down the stairs!” Will said, clutching the bathing sheet close when Hannibal advanced on him.

“I will say it once more, Will, I did no such thing!” Hannibal said. “This is why you are terrified of me? You thought I’ve tried twice to kill you and I was going to, what? Drag you from your mare’s back and squeeze the life out of you on the lane to Hartford?”

“Yes,” Will said, trembling but not backing down. “Why shouldn’t you? It would certainly make things easier.”

“Easier on whom, pray tell?” Hannibal asked, gesturing widely. “What would I gain by it? The probability you have left your worldly belongings to your father? The very real possibility of losing Hartford House forever, if we prefer to be as cold as you believe I am?”

Will stared at him, his pain-clouded mind seizing on what his husband had said, perfectly reasonable arguments he’d been too nervous and uncertain to consider before now. It cracked his surety like a shell and left him adrift on sudden, frightening doubt.

“This is entirely beyond my comprehension! You are only now telling me your saddle was tampered with! There was an intruder—no two intruders—in our home, one of whom pushed you down the stairs, no doubt fully intending you not survive! And when you do manage to survive, you don’t tell me about it! Gods, I cannot remember ever being so angry! Why on earth didn’t you come to me so—”
“Because I didn’t wish to meet the same fate as the former Lady Clarges!” Will said, his anxiety and confusion putting a snarl in his words.

Hannibal drew back as if he’d been hit with something much more painful than a crop and Will felt his stomach sink, his bond to Hannibal giving him nothing but pain.

Hannibal’s amber gaze fastened on Will, his eyes wide and horrified and showing profound hurt nearly as palpable as the bond itself.

“Murdered, you mean?” he asked, and his mouth curled in a wry, unhappy smile. “Do you imagine I drowned her in the bath, as you seem to believe I intended to do to you?”

Will swallowed hard, clinging to the tub with one hand, the seam of the sheet with the other, staring at his husband who seemed equally as devastated as he was hurt.

“I can only infer from what little I have f—”

“You cannot blame me for listening to rumors when that is all I have to listen to!” Will flared, wincing when his head throbbed with more insistence from the volume of his voice. “I was never even told she existed, Hannibal! The world believes you killed her and I am left with nothing but...

 pieces to put together as they fit!”

“And they fit in the shape of my killing her,” Hannibal said, and turned away, rubbing his face, weary resignation falling over him in a way that made Will’s tension fall, in turn. “Shall I tell you another story? Hm? One to set your mind at ease, perhaps? Or merely confirm that I am, in fact, just the monster you imagine?”

Will shivered in the bath sheet, fingers so tight on the side of the tub that his knuckles blanched white.

Hannibal swung back to face him, the stitched wound on his cheek livid against his skin, his amber eyes unhappy and angry but filled with something else Will’s gut told him was guilt.

“But perhaps it is suitable you imagine me precisely as I am,” he said, hollow and cold. “A man who sends his young spouse out alone in his nightclothes with no protection, a man who has killed as many men in a war as he has saved, and a man who gutted his first wife like a felled doe in our marriage bed.”

Will flinched from the statement, from the brutal picture it brought to his mind—blood, fear, and anguished, frantic screams streaking across his imagination like fingers of lightning, a brief illumination of a possibility that shook him to his soul.

Yet, as it had with Molly in Duxbury, even hearing it from Hannibal’s own mouth couldn’t stem the sliver of hope that Hannibal was innocent and the world was wrong.

That his husband was, beneath it all, just a man like any other and not the monster he seemed or claimed to be.

“You’re deliberately trying to frighten me,” Will said, feeling it through his bond, latching onto Hannibal’s words to find the holes he had left behind, gaping emptiness of events he’d pared away to leave himself culpable. “Why are you telling me this way? What happened to her, Hannibal? Why do you feel so guilty?”

“I am guilty, Will,” Hannibal said, and stood trembling before him, fists clenched and chest heaving with his short, sharp breaths. The forceful maelstrom of emotion drained slowly out of him, leaving only abysmal grief and a terrible sense of wrong. “You should be afraid of me.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Will said, clenching his teeth against the pain in his head as it shot down his shoulders, aching and deep. “I have never lied to you, Hannibal, and you will not lie to me, in turn! Tell me the truth—”

“What possible difference could it make, now? The worst has happened and you have nearly been killed because you fear me,” Hannibal said, dropping his gaze to the floor, his fists unclenching. “Once again, I have failed someone I should have protected. At least you didn’t die because of it. I suppose that makes you a rarity of one.”

Hannibal crossed the washroom in three quick strides and wrenched open the door to Will’s suite, intent on his plans to keep his mate safe. He shouted for Jimmy to go fetch Berger, the boom of his voice loud enough it was entirely likely Mr. Berger heard him without Jimmy having to do so. The valet, very wisely however, did as he was told.
Will stared at him through the ache in his head, reading his pain and his upset, reading the deeper guilt which seemed to permeate him, at odds with the bone-deep regret saturating his bond.

“What happened to her, Hannibal?” Will asked, the shiver from the cold giving way to feverish heat and an unsettling lurch from his stomach. “Tell me what really happened to her and I will give you the benefit of the doubt. I want answers. I want you to talk to me.”

He swallowed hard at the startled flare of hope he saw in Hannibal’s amber eyes, at the sudden surge of it he felt through his bond, and said with less force, “You should have told me long before now.”

“When? Over tea and scones? During all of the many long hours we’ve spent together?” Hannibal scoffed, and snorted with disdain, still chuffing with protective fury. “Believe it or not, Will, I did plan on telling you, but I certainly won’t do so in the middle of your bath while there is a killer lying in wait for you! Regardless of your current feelings for me, you are my spouse and your safety is my foremost concern.”

Will watched Hannibal move back through the washroom to his own suite, feeling less sure of his suspicions and more sure Hannibal was genuinely and deeply distressed by what he’d told him. The understanding that his fears might have been mislaid untangled a twisted jumble of isolation and hopelessness inside of him, filling him with a relief he couldn’t quite keep out of his voice when he called out to him, “You truly do not wish I was dead?”

“No! Gods no!” Hannibal bellowed, frustrated and angry because too much time had passed now to properly figure out who actually had rigged Will’s saddle or violated the safety of their home. He yanked the bell pull by his bed for good measure and returned to the washroom to stand in the doorway, eyes blazing. “Had I any idea you had been so threatened in our home, Will, I would have packed you away from here in a heartbeat! When I find out who is responsible for this—and I will find out—I cannot guarantee I will hold my temper! They are certainly going to pay in full for the pain and fear they have caused you, I can promise you that!”

The weight of the entire world lifted from Will’s heart. Such simple words with such profound effect accompanied by Hannibal’s protective Alpha anger made Will feel safer than he had in years. The dark, ugly knot of sick fear and distrust uncoiled from Will’s heart in slow degrees of relief. He had no one but this Alpha his instincts had formed to so long ago, and the knowledge that Hannibal tried to kill him had hurt Will in ways he couldn’t bear to address.

But now he was no longer standing alone against an unseen enemy with no resources and nowhere to turn.

Hannibal was there with him, with all of his Alpha strength to lend in his defense.

“We shall have to take measures,” Hannibal said, thinking aloud, distracted and frustrated and practically growling. “It is unacceptable that we are not safe in our beds! Everything about this is unacceptable!”

“I asked Mr. Hawkes to be more vigilant with who had access to the house,” Will said, eyes sweeping closed with the force of his relief, the enormity of it eclipsing even the pain he was feeling, if only for a moment. “I worried your grandfather would be in danger.”

“Yet you were not worried for yourself?” Hannibal asked, and laughed again, humorless and resigned. “Don’t answer that, please. I would only be burdened by it.”

Will said nothing, still absorbed in the growing understanding that Hannibal was not intent on seeing him dead, by the hope that he hadn’t murdered his first wife as everyone assumed, though Will had a good many questions on that count.

“I cannot fathom what you were thinking! Your mind is such that I have great difficulty believing you could ever be remotely thoughtless, yet thoughtless you have been!” Hannibal said, hands on his hips, beside himself with disbelief and surging, protective anger. He was at a loss, uncertain how to protect Will when Will refused to be protected—worse, when Will thought he was what he needed protection from. “Where the seven hells is he? I refuse to tolerate this!”

“I suppose there’s nothing to be done about it now,” Will said, fumbling the bathing sheet around when his words drew his husband’s agitated, unsteady attention. He managed to cover himself from nape to ankles but he did not try rising from the empty tub. He did not at all trust himself to get out of it now. He’d nearly gone head first into the floor trying the first time.

“Noth—have you taken leave of your senses completely?” Hannibal asked, looking fairly fierce as he glared down at Will, who managed to gaze back up at him with that damnable composure of his, glassy-eyed and woozy. “You will—no, I have no reason to explain this to you.”
“Hannibal?” Will called, wary when he strode from the washroom once again, leaving the door to his suite standing wide. He clutched the side of the tub and leaned over, calling, “Hannibal! What are you going to do?”

“I cannot trust you with your own safety!” Hannibal shouted, and yanked fiercely on the velvet call rope by his bed much more vigorously than he had before, no doubt waking a clamor downstairs loud enough to scare the dead in Duxbury. “You are reckless and thoughtless and haven’t a care for yourself! If I leave you to your own devices, you’ll be dead by the end of the month! Nay! By the end of the week!”

Will subsided, a thoughtful frown on his face. With force enough to be heard over Hannibal’s dark, angry muttering, he said, “I don’t like the sound of that!”

“I am entirely disregarding your preferences in this matter, Will!” Hannibal said, appearing in his line of sight looking quite unsteady and angry, his scent a flagrant warning he was in full flush to fight and damn the consequences. It teased Will’s nose and pooled in his belly, making his fingers and toes curl, as if the scent was something he could wrap around himself and delve into quite happily. “I am your husband and you will do as I say!”

The words acted like cold water on that warm feeling and Will drew up, offended. Before his better sense could catch up with his temper, he shouted, “Like hell I will!”

He rose like Venus from the sea and those playful little spots at the corners of his eyes unhelpfully converged on him all at once.

Hannibal saw the blood drain from Will’s face and saw him start to buckle. In an instant he was there, rushing to catch Will up and swing him from the tub, bulky wet sheet and all.

“I am going to be sick,” Will said, in the cautious, quiet tones of someone who very much meant it, his back and shoulders flaring with pain, even as Hannibal was with him.

“It’s that damned knock you took!” Hannibal said, careful not to raise his voice, his anger evaporating to deep concern. He eased Will down next to the basin and held him there. When Will bent his head to the porcelain, Hannibal took the chance to smooth his damp curls back and take a closer look at his head. He was distracted from his inspection by Berger coming in at last, and called, “Berger, have Cook make some weak tea and porridge and bring it up with some ice as quickly as possible.”

“No, don’t trouble yourself,” Will said, the urge to be sick passing in increments now that he wasn’t moving so rapidly. He felt the warmth of Hannibal’s body around his and relaxed slightly, some of his pain easing with the loss of his tension.

“I will trouble myself and everyone else all I like, thank you very much,” Hannibal informed him. “Considering how little trouble you are most times, I think we can manage well enough just now. Do you need to be sick?”

“No, I think it passed,” Will said, still understandably cautious.

He growled softly when Hannibal scooped him up, his brow furrowing with irritation as he was carried into his husband’s suite.

“The nausea is brought on by movement,” Hannibal said, depositing Will neatly against the pillows, half sitting up in his bed. “As you have undoubtedly realized. You need to lie quietly. Keep your eyes closed as much as you can.”

Will didn’t. He slit his eyelids against his better judgment to see Hannibal moving from window to window, drawing the heavy drapes closed against the brightening sunlight, leaving the room in near total darkness. The flare of a match was followed by the sharp scent of sulfur as Hannibal lit a lamp and turned it down to a low, bare flame still achingly bright in the darkness.

When he returned to the bed, Will unconsciously clutched the bath sheet tighter and closed his eyes again, wincing as the bed shifted with his husband’s weight.

Callused fingers brushed softly against his brow as the lump was again exposed, followed by the unexpected brush of Hannibal’s thumb over the wrinkle in his brow which accompanied the gruff admonition, “Being cross won’t help your headache.”

“I am not cross,” Will said, eyes fluttering open with less pain than before. “I am thoughtful.”

“That is certainly true,” Hannibal admitted, seated alongside Will’s hip, his fingers moving to linger in Will’s curls, warm and gentle. “Try not to be too terribly thoughtful, Will. Rest is what fixes this particular problem. I’ve seen these types of injuries before.”
“I know,” Will said, swallowing hard. “I’ve read your contributions to the Capital Medical Journal. Not that I am any wiser, mind you. For an entry occupying so many pages, it offered surprisingly little insight into the matter of concussions.”

Hannibal chuffed a low laugh and told him, “See? You’re already more yourself.”

Will offered a rueful, reluctant chuckle, resisting the urge to turn his head against Hannibal’s touch. Those long fingers moved softly against Will’s scalp, lifting goosebumps on his skin. He was checking, Will knew. Checking for other lumps, for other cuts, yet even knowing the intent behind the touch didn’t lessen the effect. It eased him, reaching deeper than the surface to find the tension that had hardened him since childhood. It annoyed him something so insignificant could make such a profound difference without Hannibal even being aware of it, and he summoned a glower to look up at his husband.

Much to his surprise, Hannibal gazed down at him with an expression he’d never chanced to see before. Softness, perhaps. Fondness. Concern. Worry. Will had no idea how to interpret it.

He’d never had to do so before now.

“Most of my observations into such injuries were made on the battlefield,” Hannibal said, and when those ugly memories assaulted him, as they so often did, he found the heat of Will’s skin and the soft, soap-sweet scent of him made them lose their sharpness. He checked Will’s eyes, noting the reaction of his pupils, murmuring, “War is not all gunshots, impalement, and cannon blow back. I’ve seen a good many knocks such as this, though recovery vastly varies and war is hardly conducive to proper observation.”

A slight, amused smile curved his mouth, the light gleaming across the stark height of his cheekbone and just barely lighting the edges of his lips as he said, “Knowing your resilience, Will, you’ll be back on your mare come morning.”

Will laughed softly, a light sigh escaping him when Hannibal’s thumb traced the arch of one eyebrow. He cleared his throat to cover it and reminded him, “It is important to be useful.”

“Believe me, you have been a tad more than useful,” Hannibal told him, dropping his hand, but with great reluctance. Berger returned then, bearing a lovely tray with the requested weak tea.

“The porridge takes a bit of time, m’Lord,” he said, cautiously pouring a cup for Will. “I’ll bring it up as soon as it’s done.”

“Berger, tell Mr. Hawkes I wish to speak with him on the subject of House security,” Hannibal said. “And tell Peter I expect to see him directly after.”

“A thought you were the culprit,” Will murmured, accepting the teacup cautiously when Hannibal handed it to him. Hannibal blew out a soft breath of relief and asked, “Do you believe I am not at fault?”

“I think you are at fault for a good many things, Hannibal, but I no longer think you tried to kill me,” Will offered, wincing as his shifting pulled on his back. With caution and hesitance, he said, “It might be wise to allow you to offer your professional opinion... on one condition.”

Hannibal’s mouth quirked at the corners, the barest hint of a smile. “Name it.”

“Tell me about her,” Will said, setting the teacup aside. “As you intended to, Hannibal. The whole truth of it. You owe me that.”

Hannibal reached out and smoothed his hair, the heavy uneasiness in him lessened somewhat by the strengthening scent of Will’s skin, by the silken feel of his curls, by the gentle readiness for acceptance he could sense.
“I owe you far better than you’ve gotten from me so far, Will. You have a vast capacity for goodness in you that I lack,” he said, fingers falling to Will’s neck, lightly stroking his skin. He pulled away with a sigh and folded a cloth over the ice Berger had brought him. “I do not wish to test that. My behavior regarding Melinda does me no credit.”

“Your willingness to speak of something which shames you does you credit, Hannibal,” Will breathed, eyes closing when Hannibal gently pressed the ice pack to the lump on his head. A deep breath gave him Hannibal’s Alpha scent, the sharp warning tone softening as he calmed. It brought another warm ripple to his lower belly, slumberous and faint but potent. “Truth has many sides, and we each prefer a side of our choosing, but I would hear yours in this matter.”

“May I ask first how you heard about Melinda?” Hannibal asked, letting Will’s slender fingers replace his own on the pack. He moved down to Will’s long feet to bare his legs to his knees, wincing at the smattering of purple bruises he’d gathered on his shins and knees.

Will toyed with the lip of the sheet with his free hand, nervous as Hannibal began at his toes, gently testing the digits. His skin tingled, foot twitching in response to the ticklish touch as his husband’s capable hands moved firmly over him, seeking any sign of tender response.

His own curiosity if Hannibal intended to move up his entire body in such a manner brought heat flaming into his cheeks, making him doubly grateful for the ice on his head. He blurted rather than said, “I met her sister, Molly, in Duxbury. She was kind enough to tell me her story.”

“Molly Foster,” Hannibal murmured, thinking of that young blond woman Will had lunched with. He laughed once, short and sharp, trading one foot for the other, Will’s curled and unharmed little toes forsaken for his delicate ankles. His physician’s mind cataloged the movement of bones and ligaments, but the Alpha in him marveled at the solid feel of his mate in his hands, an intriguing mixture of delicacy and honed muscle that woke an unusual itch in him for more. “She was barely four years old at the time! Perhaps less, even. She was born while I was away at medical school. She couldn’t possibly recall much of what happened.”

“She didn’t, but gossip and conjecture filled in the details she lacked,” Will said, subsiding against the pillows under Hannibal’s gentle touch. He lay unresisting as his shins were inspected, each delicate brush of Hannibal’s fingers on his skin vibrating through his nerves like a plucked harp string, thrumming and true. “She told me you broke Melinda’s heart. That you swept her away when she was barely grown and eloped with her. That within a month she was dead and in the ground, her death a mystery quieted with your grandfather’s money.”

“The lauded opinion of a child not quite five years of age,” Hannibal said, and sighed, his attention shifting to Will’s bruised knees, finding them tender but not displaced, and fairly painless upon movement. He got up and went to his medical bag, still there on his vanity, and dug out his salve. He searched Will’s young face as he returned to his place, taking in his sleepy expression, his woozy blue eyes, his tousled, damp curls and the aching vulnerability that had always been there before him.

He’d just been too blind to see what Will’s strength was protecting before now.

“I had hoped, once, to never have this conversation,” he murmured, dabbing the salve on Will’s bruises with light, soft strokes. “I was a fool to think the former Lady Clarges would remain a secret, but now that I have the chance to tell you, I hardly know where to begin.”

Will took a steadying breath, preparing for the worst, the specter of his father in his dark heart whispering the truth would crush even so tentative a faith as his, that Hannibal was everything Will feared he might be and he would always be disappointed, always be betrayed.

But deeper still was something his father had never been able to pare out of him—hope. Ugly and awful and frightening in its capacity to grow, heedless of all consequence. Whatever the outcome, he knew he had to abandon expectation and simply seek the truth.

After everything that had happened, they both were owed a little honesty.

“Molly’s story was true, in most respects. Melinda and I were best friends from childhood, inseparable despite Grandfather’s disapproval. I would not heed him. You must find it hard to imagine such a thing,” Hannibal said, uttering a low, wry chuckle, concentrating on applying the salve to Will’s bruises. “I went away when I was sixteen, packed off for early entry.
to medical school. I wrote her every single day. Even knowing my grandfather had a contract with yours, I promised myself I would marry her and we would be terribly happy and nothing would ever trouble us again..."

Will’s heart ached for him, seeing Hannibal there in his imagination, young and happily in love, doting on a young blonde much like Molly. Finding hope in life after the terrible loss of his family, starting a new career as a doctor with a bright future ahead of him. The potential made Will’s throat constrict with emotion, a life yet unlived, memories yet unmade, the promise of things that never came to be.

If there was anything Will could understand to its depths, it was an unfinished life.

“I returned earlier than planned on holiday to surprise her,” Hannibal said, lost in his memories. He smiled sadly and said, “She surprised me, instead.”

“Hannibal,” Will said, blinking hard against threatening tears, feeling too keenly through his bond the things Hannibal’s ingrained stoicism would never reveal. He barely noticed when Hannibal tucked the sheet up to bare one long thigh, grimacing at the bruises there. “If you truly do not wish—"

“It is far past time I say it,” Hannibal said, careful to keep Will’s groin covered as he checked both of his legs and hips, satisfied he had no palpable fractures, only deep bruises he began to cover with salve. “Perhaps it will help you see me more clearly.”

Hannibal’s hands on his thighs bled into Will’s awareness, bringing blushes in their wake. His husband’s professionalism made it less embarrassing, but Will still shifted and tried to sit up straighter in an effort to not feel so exposed. The movement rippled down his spine from his nape to his tailbone, terrible pain that made him wince and prompted Hannibal to gently touch his waist, warning, “This may pain you, Will, but I suspect you might have broken a rib or two.”

“No, it’s just an ache,” Will said, a bit breathless when Hannibal shaped his torso through the sheet, carefully feeling his way up Will’s body, testing and gentle. Will winced, relieved when nothing shifted, and Hannibal seemed satisfied, though reluctant to pull his hands away.

“You’re remarkably resilient, not a break on you. Jimmy should bind them during the day. I’ll let him apply the salve for you,” Hannibal said, placing the little jar on the nightstand. “Here, let me check your spine.”

Will followed his lead, letting Hannibal shift him around on the bed onto his belly, a pillow hugged underneath him to cradle his bruised ribs and head, the ice pack propped carefully so as not to press on the painful spot.

Hannibal settled at his side, a warm, weighty presence next to him, one hand on Will’s nape in a gentle pressure he shifted to soft kneading, his sensitive fingers finding the ache with unerring accuracy.

“It will help the headache,” Hannibal said, not wishing to be misunderstood. There had been entirely too many misunderstandings between them already.

Will focused sharply on the warm, sure hand kneading his nape with such gentle caution, not in an attempt to control him, but to heal him. It bothered him that even so well-intentioned and impersonal a thing could affect him with such deep immediacy, and he found himself confounded by his Omegan nature yet again, unsure how to counter it, uncertain if he even wanted to.

So many long, lonely years without comfort made it difficult to resist.

Hoping to distract himself, Will whispered, “How did she surprise you, Hannibal? What was it that set such sad circumstances into motion?”

Hannibal smiled, a taut and unhappy smile he used to cover all manner of disquiet. “It was to be my last year in medical school. I managed to escape a few days ahead of schedule, and when I came home, I went straight away to a place where we always met in secret in the hopes of finding her there,” he said, the words coming out a low, throaty purr. “And she was. I discovered her naked in the arms of her lover.”

Will flinched, the image hitting him like a slap in the face.

“I cut off contact entirely, naturally,” Hannibal said, leaning over him, moving both hands to Will’s shoulders to knead away the pain. “I left her behind, spent a sorry few weeks with Grandfather, then returned to finish my schooling and resign myself to the understanding I had made a serious error in judgment. She wrote to me for months afterwards, letter after letter I returned unopened until one day I received one from her father telling me Melinda was about to give birth to my child and demanding some action on my part.”
Will remained silent, feeling Hannibal’s anger like a burning brand within him, but it was overshadowed by the rupturing hurt it tried so desperately to hide. This girl, this child-bride he’d had such hope in, had landed him a blow that had fractured him down to his soul.

“I read the next letter she sent me, begging me to rescue her from her thoughtless actions, pleading for me to remember our fast friendship and extend my protection to her,” Hannibal said, sightless eyes fixed on Will’s soft and tousled, damp curls, but seeing only the damning words on the pages she had written. “Her lover abandoned her, as they so often do, so she chose to lay it all squarely on my shoulders, trusting our friendship would save her.”

“You did save her, didn’t you? Rather, you tried,” Will softly said, feeling the tension crawl down Hannibal’s arms and settle in the hands on his body. “You loved her too much to leave her in such wretched straits.”

Hannibal’s shoulders slumped, the barest sign of defeat. “Did I? Perhaps I did. Perhaps that was it, what compelled me to return and hide Melinda and her coming child beneath the blanket of my position.

“When I came for her, I found she had tried to rid herself of the baby through... unspeakable means but only gained an infection from the attempt,” he murmured, cautious in his anger not to hurt his little mate, tenderly easing his hands down the ditch of Will’s spine and up again, chasing the tension away with his inspection, the unevenness his hands encountered lost in the texture of the sheet as it shifted and bunched. “She was so very ill. The infection had gone into her blood. She was in great pain when I reached her, and I feared the damage done to the baby through her rash actions.”

“She was frightened,” Will breathed, feeling the panic of her situation, the future stretching ahead of her in abysmal loneliness, shunned by her neighbors and shamed for her youthful indiscretion. The only reason it didn’t entirely overcome him was due to the gentle pressure of Hannibal’s hands on his shoulders and back. “It is such a harsh price to pay for such a trespass. Her parents knew of the attempt?”

“That is how they discovered her circumstances,” Hannibal said, focusing on the feel of Will’s body beneath his hands, the warmth he gave off, the suppleness of his muscles. The more he touched him, the more aware he became of his own calm. He knew from an intellectual standpoint it was a natural occurrence between an Alpha and Omega, thanks to Bedelia’s instruction, he just hadn’t expected to feel it so keenly or so deeply, as if merely touching Will was an action he could continue forever and feel perfectly completed by. It made it less painful to continue confessing his sins, and he drew a deep breath to say, “I told Melinda I would rescue her reputation on the condition she admit to her mother and father the child was not mine.

“She did so, eager to be unburdened, eager to find a way out of the mess she had found herself in. They were stunned but quickly saw their livelihood was at stake,” he went on, recalling their faces. “They were simple people with good, simple lives and her conduct shocked them but they were grateful for my intervention. I took her north and married her.”

‘I thought she was a princess and he was taking her away to a royal castle...’

“Grandfather was furious, of course,” Hannibal said, a dark chuckle escaping him as he went to work on Will’s fragile neck again, smoothing his thumbs up to the base of his skull. “He threatened to disown me on the spot, raged about the contract he’d made, demanded I annul the marriage. He was far too wise to think the baby was mine and accused me of throwing away my future for childish fantasies. We eventually agreed I would send her and the child to the south and never set eyes on either of them again, but he needn’t have worried. She succumbed to her infection just a few days after her sixteenth birthday.”

He fell silent and Will took a deep, shuddering breath, feeling the warm weight of Hannibal’s hands slide down to his shoulders. He wanted toweep for him, a disillusioned youth still so deeply in love he would risk the ire of his family and his very position just to rescue her.

“I had to... I had to cut her open to save the baby, a little girl,” Hannibal whispered.

Will’s heart lurched with his quiet statement, a world of horror pared down to such a simple sentence, describing something even Will’s vivid imagination had difficulty wrapping around—cut into the body of a loved one or else lose two instead of one.

“Did she live?” Will asked, hoping she had, knowing if she hadn’t, it made Hannibal’s necessary action even more upsetting.

“She lived,” Hannibal said, resuming his gentle massage of Will’s back, remembering when he had held her, his fingertips brushing the soft, round cheek of Melinda’s newborn daughter. “There wasn’t a mark on her, though she was weak from the state her mother had been in.”
“What happened to her?” Will breathed, grateful for Hannibal’s warm touch as he worked both hands down the loosening muscles of his back, firm but tender. It eased the sharp bite of his imagination, somehow both calming and feeding the warmth within him as if such soothing attention could hold it at bay. “Is she close?”

“No... I honestly don’t know,” Hannibal whispered, his deep voice raw and unsettled when he said, “Grandfather had to step in; I was too... I was useless with shock and grief. He sent the baby away to be raised when the Fosters could not take her. At my insistence he gave her family a settlement to lift them from poverty and allowed Melinda her place in the family cemetery. I left the moment I could get away, fled to the military and left the country, the only thing I could think to do to get as far from her as possible.”

“She hurt you,” Will whispered, knowing there was something more, something Hannibal had still not told him. His flight tasted of guilt and anguish and soured adoration, an overpowering wave of oppression flooding him to foreign shores.

“She begged me for my forgiveness,” Hannibal said, all tone and inflection leaving his voice. His hands slid to the wings of Will’s scapulae and paused there, fingers curving just beneath his arms, the tips smoothing absently against his sheet-covered skin. “As she lay there in pain, striving to last long enough to bring her daughter into the world, she confessed she had wronged me, that she had been frightened and had turned to me because she trusted me and I had never failed her. She begged me to forgive her... and I refused.”

Will’s head came up and he turned slightly, just enough to see Hannibal’s handsome face set in lines of pain and self-reproach.

“She wept and pleaded for me to forgive her and I refused her,” he said again, trying to make it solid in his memory, in his heart. That had been the start of it, Will knew. That was what had made those walls go up, thicker and stronger than before. Melinda had been the first to breach them after Lady Murasaki, after losing Mischa, and her betrayal had taught an impressionable young man that the lessons he’d learned as a child were all true.

They were the very same lessons Will knew to their depths—there was nothing good or honest in the world, no kindness left unpunished, no feeling left unspurned, no way to take back what was said or done or say the things that should have been said.

It was little wonder this man was before him, divorced in so many ways from what others took for granted, lashing back at the world while Will removed himself from it. Two vastly different responses, each as destructive and unchecked as the other.

“She died mere moments after I did so. I stole her hope and let her die thinking I hated her,” Hannibal whispered, seeking the comfort of touching his mate without realizing it, the brush of his hands changing to a caress that twined up into Will’s fragrant, silken curls. “She was just a child, just a frightened, silly child, and I let her go in such a terrible way—”

“You were little better than a child yourself, Hannibal,” Will said, his understanding of his husband finding a broad new wing where the weeping shadow of Melinda Lecter drifted. “She was in a hopeless situation that grew more desperate by the hour and you did what you could to mend it. When we are wounded and cornered, we strike out. We strive to walk in the footsteps of saints and martyrs, but we are merely human, Hannibal. You had no control over her decisions.”

“No, I didn’t, but had I been a better man, she would never have sought such disreputable company,” Hannibal said, moving his hands to the base of Will’s spine. “Had I come at her first letter, she never would have sought out a back alley butcher. Had I returned sooner, I could have cleared the infection she contracted from it. Had I put aside my anger at her, she might have found the strength to survive.”

Will’s mouth tightened and his throat constricted, even as his heart fluttered and ached with the guilt rolling off of Hannibal in waves of self-loathing. “Looking back at what might have been is a dangerous pastime, Hannibal. We have all been in situations where we wish things might have gone differently, fantasies where we change the course of our world through one correct word or one right action. It is a fiendish torture. There is no return to what has been. There is no reversing time to bring teacups back together again, however much we lament their shattering.”

Hannibal flinched from his soft, quiet statement, Will’s surety in man’s stagnant nature sliding like a knife between his ribs. Melinda was dead and gone from him and all the mistakes he made lost to a past that would vanish with his own death.

But Will was before him, with his keen understanding and valiant strength, not so far from his reach that he could not touch him, not so lost that he could not win him back and make amends for what had passed between them.

If there was anything to be learned from shattering a teacup, it was to be more careful the next time around.
“I am as foolish now as I was then. The lessons she taught me I could not bear to benefit from,” Hannibal quietly admitted, brows drawing down in a frown when his soothing hands felt a knot out of place on Will’s back. “Her last moment on this earth was spent trying to reach me and I would not be reached.”

“It was a terrible thing,” Will said, thinking of the rumors and lies following Hannibal like a shadow for sixteen years, unchallenged by him because to vindicate himself would be to expose Melinda’s secret. “I wish it had not happened to you. I wish... none of this had happened to you.”

He, too, was a problem pushed onto Hannibal’s hands, a marriage forced despite his wishes, a spouse with burdens he neither asked for nor wanted.

“I understand now why you were so livid,” he breathed, lost in the reflection of Hannibal’s perception, feeling the experience of their first few days of marriage from his husband’s point of view all over again, but with a few facet. “Home from the horrors of war eager to see your family and start your life all over again, and your grandfather punished you for your disobedience by giving you me. Twice married by circumstances outside of your control, both times to people who gave you grave offense.”

“You do not offend me,” Hannibal whispered, brushing his hand down Will’s spine and back up to his shoulders. Every bit of Will seemed to freeze in the wake of that soft statement. Even his heart seemed to skip a beat, rattling to find a new rhythm that such a thing might be true.

“You... confound me. You amaze me,” Hannibal said, feeling Will’s tension fall to yielding beneath his sensitive fingers. “You infuriate me and sometimes you even cosh me, but you never offend me.”

Will bit his lip, eyes closing against the tender touch, against the softness of Hannibal’s words, against the way he turned the smallest flicker of light on the darkness of Will’s isolation that had drained him slowly but surely, the steady drip of his soul from the cracks left behind in the wake of his father’s and husband’s careless handling.

Hannibal concentrated on rubbing Will’s back, tracing the strange knot chasing across Will’s skin in a most unusual fashion, palpable even through the bunched material of the bathing sheet. He slipped his fingers into the lip of the sheet, intending to tug it down only far enough to have a look, saying, “I’ll right it in a moment, Will, there is something that isn’t—”

He cut off and Will froze, heart pounding as the sheet was slowly drawn down to his hips. It pulled from his nerveless fingers, turned back to bare him all the way to his pelvis, the air lifting goose-flesh on his exposed skin.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed, and Will squeezed his eyes closed, taking a shallow, stuttering breath, knowing what his husband was seeing.

Scars.

Scars crossing and recrossing the fragile expanse of Will’s skin from his shoulders to the dimples above his bottom, all shapes and sizes, some stretched out of true by time, a map of cruelty testament to treatment Hannibal had never dreamed he might have been dealt.

“Gods in heaven,” Hannibal whispered, sitting back until his mind could make sense of it, this history of Will’s childhood laid out in a pattern of layered, trailing pain like brands on his skin.

Will moved to pull the sheet up but stilled when Hannibal touched his back, naked fingertips to bare skin. The touch was faint, a tracery of his scars so light he barely felt it, respectful of the pain he’d endured to bear them. Will trembled, aching with upset, confused by the relentless press of grief he could feel through his bond to Hannibal—horror and outrage and blazing, righteous indignation. His deep, secret heart was profoundly shaken when his husband leaned towards him, when both callused hands settled with exquisite tenderness on his shoulders and traced the scars with care.

“When you came to me that first night, Will, I remember seeing the marks on your sides,” he whispered, his voice filled with husky sorrow. “I could not imagine what they were. I could never have imagined... this.”

Will swallowed hard, skin prickling beneath the touch as Hannibal took stock of him, seeing for himself the value his father put on an unwanted Omega.

“I would take these from you,” Hannibal breathed, and Will shivered when he felt the heated puff of Hannibal’s breath against his skin.

The faint, reverent kiss between his shoulders forced Will’s eyes to fly wide open, rapidly filling with tears he refused to let fall. “I would take all of these from you and bear them myself, Will, if only I could.”
“Hannibal...”

Hannibal pressed his forehead to the place he’d kissed, one hand on Will’s shoulder, exhaling softly over his skin.

“It was your father, wasn’t it?” he breathed, lifting his face enough to press another kiss to the base of Will’s neck right on the knob of his spine, soothing and full of regret, as if the tenderness of his touch could somehow erase the suffering such wounds had caused.

“Yes,” Will said, his voice throaty and low. A shiver flowed through him when Hannibal eased back, one large hand sweeping his skin from his nape to his bottom.

“I find I am capable of murdering someone in cold blood after all.”

The flat, quiet fury of his statement was as startling to Will as the words themselves.

“W-what?”

“You heard me,” Hannibal whispered, stroking Will’s skin with both hands, taking up a soothing caress as if those horrid scars didn’t inspire the disgust Will knew he surely must feel. “I would murder him for what he’s done to you, Will, and gladly.”

Will said nothing, completely taken aback by his response.

“Any person, man, woman, or Omega, who puts their hands on you ever in your life will answer to me,” Hannibal said, the words delivered without flourish, a flat statement of fact that made Will’s eyes widen with surprise. His traitorous heart kicked with a sudden lurch and he brought his hand to press against his mouth, stifling the sound threatening to erupt. “Be it your father or this unknown person trying to harm you, Will, I promise you that. And I always keep my promises.”

Will shuddered, resisting everything in him that pulled him towards the Alpha touching him, tender and filled with regret. The same Alpha who had once scoffed at his responses, called him repulsive and stupid and sickening, who had followed in his father’s footsteps and managed to wound him in a way his father never could by forging a bond that could never be broken, a mockery of what might have been.

Will wet his lips and tugged at the sheet, attempting to cover his back, attempting to find what dignity was left to him now that Hannibal saw him as he truly was—damaged, weak, and insignificant.

“You needn’t concern yourself, Hannibal,” Will said. “You have always been very clear on your regard for Omegas, myself in particular. I will take care of myself. I always have.”

“Will, I have treated you with unreasonable and unforgivable disregard,” Hannibal said, slowly sliding his hands away, attuned to Will’s deep turmoil. “Please believe me, had I known your circumstances, things would have gone much differently.”

“For what reason? Would it have made me less Omega? Or would you have thought it fitting to see me so shamed? Whatever feeling this moment has inspired in you, Hannibal,” he whispered, sliding the sheet up to hide the proof of what he was, “please extinguish it. I am not what you think I am.”

“I would not have you be less Omegan, Will. I would not have you be anything but the person you are, and I would never wish to see you shamed or believe any such treatment is fitting,” Hannibal said, smoothing the sheet up over Will’s shoulders, those scars imprinted on his memory, burned into his mind’s eye along with the horrible understanding of what Will had suffered. “What do you imagine I think you are, seeing what has been done to you?”

“Weak,” Will said, his voice cracking on the sharpness of the word, a single syllable filled with loathing and fear, as if speaking it aloud begat the possibility of truth. “I cannot bear being weak, Hannibal. I cannot bear being... what I am.”

“Abused?” Hannibal asked, dropping his hands entirely despite the urge to soothe him, Will’s growing distress pulling on his instincts in a way nearly impossible to resist. But instinct, he knew, was the heart of this matter, and he softly asked, “Or Omegan?”

“Is it such a difficult thing for you to imagine?” Will asked, breathless with the force of his upset, the lessons of his life and the origins of his bond to this man coming to bear on him, forcing the words from his mouth despite the pain they caused him.

“I have spent the entirety of my life lamenting the gender of my birth. It took my father years to make me understand how offensive I and other like me are to the world. Did you think that it was my dream to end up with someone who loathes me and everything I am? That I hoped to leave my father’s house as I was and find myself just as despised, faced with a different type of violence that was no less painful?”

Hannibal flinched, hands clenching into fists in his lap, the memories of his first days with Will stark and harsh.
“I earned those scars. Every one of them is proof that I was not betrayed into my nature. Each one is a moment of weakness that my father recognized and curtailed,” Will said, teeth clenching to hold back the waver in his voice. “He could not change my gender, but he ensured I would not fall victim to it. I am... grateful to him, Hannibal. It is only due to his firm instruction that I am not a mindless bundle of instincts clinging to an Alpha for succor.”

Hannibal heard the words but, more, he heard the meaning behind them and knew he owed his fair share of blame. He had no idea how to ease him but he wanted to. Will, however, was so deeply averse to his own nature that he would resist it, fight it, make himself sick rather than accept it, and he was far too ill already. Hannibal had condemned Will’s Omegan gender as if it had been a choice made to spite him rather than a natural state of being that could not be changed. He had unwittingly adapted Will’s burgeoning Omegan nature to mirror his own prejudice, making him resentful of his own instincts, impatient with the qualities that made him who he was, and deeply disgusted with the way Nature had designed him.

“I earned those scars,” Will stiffly said again, refusing to cry, refusing to be weak, refusing to be those things his father had claimed to be beating out of him. “Every single one of them is a lesson learned.”

Scars on the inside, Grandfather had said, and Hannibal saw just how devastating that could be. He wet his lips and pitched his voice low to say, “Then I disapprove of your education, Will.”

“The last thing I need is your pity, Lord Clarges,” Will said, moving to escape the acceptance those words hinted at, or perhaps what his own nature hoped to trick him into believing was there. He got to his feet and stood swaying in place, the force of his pain threatening to tip him into darkness, but he refused to give in to it and clenched his teeth on an exhale.

“That’s a relief, as I would never pity someone who has risen so admirably against expectation to manage what you have managed,” Hannibal told him, standing to steady him, his touch gentle and cautious but there all the same, ready to offer support should Will find himself waveriing. Will’s upset eased somewhat at the gesture, just enough for Hannibal to tentatively offer, “I understand now why you asked what you did. Believe me, Will, I would never treat any child of ours with the... horrific cruelty and disregard that your father has treated you. That anyone could treat another human being with such callous sadism, let alone the precious gift that is their own child—it infuriates me. Hanging is too good for him. Drawing and quartering is too good for him. There is no amount of suffering he could endure that would purge him of his sins against you. A child is a treasure, our only true legacy. I cannot fathom the legacy he wished to leave in treating you this way, but our children will be deeply beloved.”

Will stared at him, his chest tight with something he could not recognize, Hannibal’s sincerity finding the cracks in his walls and scaling them, threatening to breach the very thing meant to keep him at bay.

Hannibal tipped his head up, sensing or scenting it, one, and Will blushed, suspecting Hannibal’s nearness and the stress of his situation was pushing his heat closer despite the tonics he took. It would be typically Omegan, he knew, to react to so much constant dread with a call for an Alpha.

“Why do you want a child so badly?” Will asked, his intuition warning him there was something he simply wasn’t seeing, something which had brought his formerly-reluctant spouse back after six years, determined to bed him.

“Why do you not?” Hannibal asked, because he simply could not tell him, not now. Not ever, perhaps. How could he ever admit to what he’d agreed to? If he had his way, he never would, not at the risk of losing Will all over again. His voice was barely better than a whisper when he asked, “What kind of father would you be, Will?”

Will blinked, taken aback by the question, but answered without hesitation, “I would be a good father.”

“I think so, too,” Hannibal said.

Will stilled, unresisting when Hannibal slowly eased closer. The tightness in his chest grew as his husband folded around him in a blanket of heat and scent, a surety of strength promising a support upon which Will feared he could not rely. The cliff of his nightmares threatened to surface, the roar of his blood in his ears becoming the crash of the waves on the rocks, hungry and waiting for him to be foolish enough to fling himself into the unknown.

Hannibal’s arms tightened around him and Will closed his eyes, the first tense touch of being held to his husband’s chest giving way to slow acceptance. A sigh escaped him as Hannibal embraced him, his hunger for even so small an affection ravenous and frightening in its strength.

Hannibal cradled Will to him, one arm around his narrow waist, one arm sliding behind his shoulder to cup his head, urging Will to rest against him. He drew in a breath sweet with Will’s scent and closed his eyes, Will’s heart pounding against
his own, a faint tremor coursing through his taut body. He stroked his hand through Will’s curls, nose buried against his unhurt temple, and simply held him.

“I promise you things will be different, now. I promise you. Please stay, Will,” he breathed, careful not to squeeze him, careful not to overwhelm him, wishing he could reach back through time and shield him from the men who should have protected him, starting with himself. “Please stay.”

*Stay here in this room.*
*Stay here in this house.*
*Stay here with me.*

Will could feel... *something* through his bond, something in the softness of Hannibal’s words and the gentle caution of his touch. His arms trembled when he lifted them, the pain of his fall forgotten, forsaken for the overwhelming pain of his father’s ugly truths being challenged by the last man in the world he imagined would do so.

He settled his hesitant hands against Hannibal’s back and nodded, the barest concession.

He wasn’t prepared for the kiss on his temple, faint and brushing and tender. He wasn’t prepared for the light squeeze of arms around him or the soft exhale against his ear when Hannibal breathed, “Thank you.”

They stood there in each other’s embrace, warm and uncertain but reaching, peering through the murky waters of their past together at a future that seemed impossible, all things considered. Eyes closed, tentative and raw with wounds from a battle yet far from over, Will found it was just as much his own strength being sought as it was Hannibal’s, that his husband’s tense body eased in his arms with every breath, that there was as much giving in both of them as there was taking.

They drew apart by degrees, and Will could feel Hannibal’s reluctance to do so as he eased back. He gazed at his husband with confusion, trying to reconcile this moment with his bond, with everything his experience knew to be true.

Hannibal merely cupped his face, smoothing his cheeks with a crooked smile before pulling away entirely. Will watched him, bewildered as he moved to his wardrobe and plucked out a nightshirt, which he brought to his uncertain little mate.

“It will nearly swallow you, but it’s better than that damp sheet,” Hannibal said, noting the glassy look in Will’s eyes and knowing he was still in a good deal of pain. “You must be chilled to your bones by now. It was thoughtless of me not to offer sooner.”

“Thank you,” Will said, automatic good manners bumping him out of his momentary stupor. He ducked slightly when Hannibal draped the nightshirt over his head and let it fall into place, dropping the bath sheet as he fed his arms through the voluminous sleeves.

It wrapped him in soft, cool folds that quickly warmed to his body, cocooning him in Hannibal’s comforting Alpha scent in a way that made Will want to curl up into a ball and purr himself to sleep.

“I’ll get you something for the pain while the girls build the fire up,” Hannibal said as he knelt to pull the bath sheet away. He tugged the nightshirt down where it hung nearly to Will’s slender ankles. He couldn’t resist smoothing it, brushing his palms over his mate’s pale, perfect calves and the small knobs of his ankles, even down to his feet, which turned in ever-so-slightly in a way he’d never noticed before but found profoundly charming.

Will looked down at him, the odd tightness in his chest never lessening, the pressure, perhaps, of the wind atop that dark cliff, luring him towards the drop. He never imagined being so close to the edge would feel like this, like promise and hope and potential.

“Thank you,” he said again, barely an exhale.

Hannibal’s only answer was a gentle, relieved smile.

**Chapter 21**

True to his word, Hannibal had one of the housemaids build up the fire, and when the porridge arrived he had Berger set up a tray for Will where he sat curled up in Hannibal’s chair, snug beneath a lap blanket.

“Be sure you eat slowly,” Hannibal cautioned, shifting things around for him to easily reach. “And drink as much tea as you can hold, fluid will help with the ache. I’ll give you something stronger for the pain.”
“I can handle discomfort, Hannibal, in order to have my wits about me,” Will breathed.

“I insist on at least one dose for your head,” Hannibal said, busying himself preparing it, saying, “It will make you sleepy, but it will ease the pain and we will make sure you are well protected.”

He mixed the dose into a cup of tea and handed it to Will, watching him to ensure he drained the entire cup.

“Thank you,” Will said, feeling immediately better for it, well enough to become absurdly aware that he was in his husband’s suite wearing only Hannibal’s nightshirt, thick and bundled though it was. “You should have taken me to the Duchess suite.”

“I hadn’t realized,” Hannibal said, brows rising over his amber eyes. “I came here from habit. There is nothing improper in your being here, Will.”

He took the cup and poured another for Will and some for himself. Berger bustled about unobtrusively, taking care of the damp sheet and going to tidy in the washroom. Hannibal could hear soft conversation as he spoke with Jimmy, both men exchanging information to make service run smoothly.

“Will, is there anything you can recall about your accidents that might help us discover who has done this?” Hannibal asked, sitting in the chair angled next to his, elbow on his knee and fervent eyes on his mate.

Will almost shook his head but caught himself, saying in a quiet murmur over the lip of his teacup, “Everything happened so quickly, I don’t have anything clear to grasp hold of. It was all... it was motion and light, more feeling than memory.”

Hannibal thought of Will sprawled at the foot of the stairs in his nightclothes, wounded and dazed. “A frightening experience,” he said, his voice a low purr of displeasure.

“I was too surprised to be frightened at first,” Will admitted.

“I would say you needn’t be frightened now,” Hannibal said, tucking the blanket higher up over Will’s hip. “But I can tell you aren’t. Not anymore.”

“No, I’m not,” Will said, and huffed a soft laugh. “I am, however, incredibly annoyed.”

“Gods help us,” Hannibal murmured, and grinned when Will did.

The light from the fireplace picked up the seam of the wound on his cheek, still ruddy from irritation.

“I apologize for striking you, Hannibal,” Will said to him, studying the mark.

“Nonsense, you have nothing to apologize for,” Hannibal said. “Considering the circumstances, you were justified. Even without the circumstances, you were justified.”

Will gave Hannibal the steadiest stare he could manage in his state and said, “Justified, perhaps, but impulsive all the same. It must have pained you.”

“Speaking of which, I would greatly appreciate it if you could eat that porridge and tell me everything you can remember.”

They shared tea while Will ate and spoke of his fall, of what Matthew Brown had told him, of the letter Francis had brought to him and the details of his accident on the stairs. Hannibal asked questions that probed Will’s memory in ways that challenged him, pulling forth details his remarkable memory stored without his realizing it—scents, sounds, positions, environmental clues that might, when put together, form some piece of a larger puzzle.

“It is still a paltry sum,” Hannibal said after, filling Will’s teacup again, noting the way his lids drooped, the lines of pain easing around his firm, full mouth. “Yet I am better informed all the same. I will speak with Grandfather and tell him of everything that has happened so far. With the whole of Hartford House watching, it will be much more difficult for anyone to harm you.”

“Difficult,” Will said, wetting his lower lip as he put his teacup down, resenting the slight tremble of his hand. “But not impossible.”

“They shall have to get through me,” Hannibal warned. “And if that isn’t ruckus enough to put you on your guard, I’m not sure what would be.”

“It is troubling,” Will mused, frowning, and when he caught Hannibal’s raised eyebrow, he clarified, “My fall from the stairs, not your ruckus. They could not have known I would hear them or come out. It makes me wonder what their true purpose was.”
He subsided with a soft exhale, his blue eyes glassy as he fought the much-needed rest that threatened. Hannibal got to his feet, his smile soft as he tucked the blanket up around Will's shoulders.

“We'll pick it apart after you've had a chance to relax some. Meanwhile, I'll go speak to Grandfather and make sure your sister is informed you're recovering,” Hannibal murmured, pleased that Will smiled up at him, woozy and relaxed. “She's probably wondering where you are by now.”

“I doubt that,” Will said, freeing one hand from the blanket to rub absently at the base of his skull where the pain had dwindled to a dull throb. “Mina has never risen before two, and always takes her first meal in bed.”

“I cannot imagine being in bed until such an hour,” Hannibal said, straightening.

“She is accustomed to late nights,” Will said, wiggling around in the chair to rest his head against the padded side. He closed his eyes and relaxed, yawning, only half aware of Hannibal reaching down to stroke his hair. “I always imagined her at parties until dawn, dancing holes in her slippers and meeting exciting strangers.”

Hannibal smiled sadly, and asked, “Is that something you wished for, Will? Company? Dancing until dawn?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous,” Will said, perhaps a bit too quickly, a blush rising on his cheeks. He tossed his head, a slight resistance to the gentle touch that drifted to his nape, but went liquid beneath the firm squeeze that chased the last bit of ache from his skull. “That sort of life is... not for me.”

“I disagree,” Hannibal told him. “I think it would suit you.”

Will’s only response was a soft laugh, but he ducked his head to offer more of his nape, sighing when Hannibal obliged him.

“M’Lord, Mr. Hawkes and Mrs. Henderson are in the hall,” Berger said, pitching the words low so as not to disturb Will.

“Thank you, Berger. Did you tell Jimmy everything you heard here?” Hannibal asked, releasing Will’s nape with a final, lingering squeeze.

Berger nodded, mouth set in a fierce frown and looking impressively irate.

“Mark me, m’Lord, first one even dares raise a finger to him, Prince and I will flatten him.”

“I trust that you will,” Hannibal told him, brows rising, reassured when he saw the soldier surface in his longtime valet. He cast a look back at Will as he headed towards the door, telling him, “I’ll be back shortly, Will. If anyone at all comes into this room, I want you to beat them senseless with that end table and ring every bell you can reach.”

Will roused himself from his half slumber, preparing to very sensibly argue that no killer was likely to risk being caught by coming into Hannibal's suite after him, but when his eyes met Hannibal’s the words somehow bottled up behind that tightness in his chest. Instead, he smiled and said, “I will, Hannibal.”

“Berger?” Hannibal called, and when his valet looked over at him, alert, he said, “You remain here until I return. No one comes in with the exception of myself and Mr. Price. Understood?”

Berger nodded, puffing up like a bullfrog in preparation to trounce anyone who threatened Will.

Satisfied that his mate was, for the time being, not directly in danger, Hannibal let himself out, pleased to find Mr. Hawkes in the hallway, as requested, with Mrs. Henderson in close attendance.

“Go lock Will’s suite for me, please,” he said, closing the door firmly behind him and waiting for the worried housekeeper to do so. If anyone was going to come into his room after Will, they were going to do so through the door of his choosing, not go sneaking up behind him through their washroom.

“Is Grandfather still up?” Hannibal asked, knowing the elderly Alpha took frequent naps due to his arthritis medications. He headed for the stairs with both Mr. Hawkes and Mrs. Henderson in close attendance, his agitation causing both of them to exchanged concerned, wary glances.

“Yes, my Lord, he is in his study,” Mr. Hawkes said. “His Grace is feeling rather better today.”

“Good,” Hannibal said, making short work of the stairs and striding down the hallway to his grandfather's study. He rapped sharply on the door and when Grandfather called entry, he said to them both, “Come with me.”

Uneasy and showing some slight alarm at the unusual request, Mr. Hawkes dutifully gestured Mrs. Henderson ahead of them and followed Hannibal within.
“Grandfather,” Hannibal said, his worry for Will channeling to impatient pacing. “I have no idea where to start and there is no way to soften this, so I will tell you all plainly—there have been two attempts to murder Will in the time since I’ve returned.”

“My Lord!” Mr. Hawkes said, aghast, and Mrs. Henderson gasped, her eyes widening with surprise.

Roland, old and wise in ways even Hannibal had no true knowledge of, paled to a frightening degree but absorbed the information, thoughts churning behind his amber eyes.

“Do you recall his accident?” Hannibal asked, pausing to face his grandfather, his hands on his hips and his shoulders tense.

“Of course I do,” Roland said, the softness of his voice no indication of his inner turmoil. “I was told the saddle had a defect.”

“Cut, Grandfather,” Hannibal corrected him, including Mr. Hawkes in his uneasy gaze. “Someone tampered with his saddle, Will told me of it himself.”

“Why did he not tell us?” Roland asked. “Who on earth has done such a thing? Why would anyone do such a thing?”

“He did not tell us because he thought I was the one who cut it,” Hannibal said, ugly guilt filling him when he thought of how easy he had made it for Will to come to such a conclusion.

Roland stiffened in his chair, caught off guard and deeply disturbed, while Mrs. Henderson shook her head slowly with disbelief, struggling to make sense of it.

“Just as he thought I was the one who pushed him down the stairs,” Hannibal said.

“Pushed?” Mrs. Henderson gasped, utterly shocked. “He assured us he had fallen, my Lord!”

“He was attempting to protect himself, Mrs. Henderson,” Hannibal said, somber and grim. “He was, understandably, uncertain whom he could trust. Knowing now that I was not the one to push him, he has confessed that he saw someone on the landing in the darkness and pursued them. That is when someone else came from behind him and shoved him down the stairs.”

“Why am I only hearing of this accident now?” Roland asked, concern sharpening his voice.

“It was only an accident as far as any of us knew, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, rubbing his hand over his face, frustrated by how powerless he felt. “I had no idea it was more until this morning. Will is concussed, Grandfather. When he went riding off to town this morning, it triggered his symptoms and he mistook my attempts to help him for another attempt on his life.”

Mr. Hawkes was at more of a loss than Hannibal had ever seen him in his life, and when he gestured for him to sit, Hawkes did so without argument, mutely holding Mrs. Henderson’s hand on his shoulder.

“That is why he cut you with his crop,” Roland said, his hand trembling as he plucked his spectacles from his face.

“It pained me to see you so upset, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, calming somewhat as he ordered his thoughts. Just confessing to those he trusted most made him feel more in control of this ghastly situation. “But you, and the staff as well, need to know what danger he is in. Either instance could have resulted in great harm to him, if not killing him outright. I have no idea who has done this, or why, but I need your help solving this issue. That someone was able to gain access to this house unnoticed is concerning enough. Knowing they did so and harmed a member of this family is intolerable.”

“Mr. Hawkes and Mrs. Henderson will rally the staff,” Roland said, trembling hard. “If any one of them know anything at all, they will find it out, won’t you, Mr. Hawkes? I imagine the locks will be changed before nightfall?”

“You have my solemn promise, Your Grace,” Mr. Hawkes said.

“We will do everything in our power to protect the family, Your Grace,” Mrs. Henderson said, her trademark fortitude rising in the face of adversity.

Hannibal pinched the bridge of his nose, his cheek stinging where he’d stitched it. He was unable to shake the nervous tension that rose with every thought of the danger Will had faced alone, thinking he was friendless in the house that had been his home for over six years. The comfort he found in his mate’s company dissipated rapidly beneath the weight of his worries, leaving only a black hole of potential dangers.

“At least two people, Grandfather,” he breathed, dropping his hands to clench his fingers into fists. “At least two people were in this house!”

“Two people familiar enough with Hartford to find their way without lamplight, Your Grace,” Mr. Hawkes observed.
It was Mrs. Henderson who softly suggested, “Else one in where he shouldn’t be to see someone already here.”

Hannibal hadn’t had the heart to say such a thing in front of Will, but he, too, had considered it and knew it was only a matter of time before Will landed on that thought himself.

“Whoever they were, at least one of them recognized Will in the darkness and did not hesitate to push him,” Hannibal said, glowering. “He has theorized that their intention was not to murder him, Grandfather. It was an opportunity, but not the goal. Had that been their aim, they would have gone into his room after him.”

“Then what does he believe was their purpose here?” Roland asked, watching him.

Hannibal shook his head, feeling helpless and powerless and entirely frustrated. “We can only guess. But I will not play games with Will’s safety. The timing of this is altogether too convenient.”

“It would seem, my Lord, that there is an intention to discredit you,” Mrs. Henderson said, her eyes heavy with concern.

“He was six years alone here, yet upon your return he has twice nearly died.”

“You make a tempting scapegoat for anyone who wishes to remove Will,” Roland said, gazing steadily at his grandson. “But why would anyone wish to remove him is the question,” Hannibal said. “Unless he has instructions set aside elsewhere, his belongings would revert to me on his death. At the risk of sounding every bit the self-absorbed Alpha I am, I also cannot help but wonder if this is someone who merely wishes to paint me a murderer, with Will as my victim and his death incidental to their purpose.”

They all considered it in silence before Roland admitted, “The circumstances would be perfect for such. And Will is not a man who easily makes enemies. Even those rare few he offends with his honesty respect him enough to value his opinion.”

“And Mr. Verger is still in prison, Your Grace,” Mr. Hawkes said, looking anxiously from Roland to Hannibal. “He is, to my knowledge, the only one who might hold a grudge against Mr. Graham.”

“Yes,” Roland said. “There were other charges levied against him that will ensure he will not soon leave.”

“Mason is still absent from the country as far as my sources know,” Hannibal said, not elaborating further on why he kept close tabs on young Verger. He furiously tried to think of anyone else who might have a reason to hurt Will, anything to ease his mind from thinking that Will might’ve nearly died in an attempt to send Hannibal to the noose. “Who on earth else is left who might want to hurt him?”

“Whoever they are, I am determined to bring the full weight of the law against them,” Roland said, his face clouding with his own temper. “Aside from being your husband, he is the grandchild of my dearest, most beloved friend. I would never forgive myself if anything happened to him.”

“I would never forgive myself, either, Grandfather,” Hannibal murmured. “I will find these people and deal with them. If there is some grudge they have against Hartford, against either one of us, I will not allow Will to stand as collateral damage.”

“Where is he now?” Roland asked, groping for a small tin on his desk to fish out a tiny pill, which he promptly swallowed dry.

“He is in my room,” Hannibal said. “He will not be fit for some time, Grandfather. He took quite a fall and that blow to his head will not resolve overnight. I want to keep him as close as possible until we find out who has hurt him and to what end.”

“We will speak to the staff immediately!” Mr. Hawkes said, rising with indignant fury that anyone should harm any Lecter in his charge, only belatedly adding, “With your permission, of course.”

“Please do, Hawkes, especially Jimmy,” Hannibal said. “He is closest to Will. If there is anything about any of it that he can recall, any strange acquaintance, any new gossip in town regarding Will, have him come to one of us straight away.”

Mr. Hawkes and Mrs. Henderson both nodded firmly and left to do just that.

Once they were gone, Roland ventured, “Why would Will believe you wanted him dead, Hannibal?”

Hannibal dropped into a chair with a sigh and rested his face in his hands, wincing when his stitched cheek began to ache afresh.

“His memory is appalling, Grandfather,” he admitted. “Every single thing said to him, he recalls with uncanny accuracy. The night I chased him away from the table, I said I would arrange an accident for him.”

Roland was silent for a long, somber moment. “That alone would not be enough, surely.”

“Someone wrote him a letter claiming I was the one who had rigged his saddle,” Hannibal said with a humorless laugh. “The culprit himself, perhaps?”
“Who else?” Hannibal asked, and sighed again, slumping back in the chair and tipping his head back, eyes closed. “It doesn’t help that he went to Duxbury to see if the rumors of my previous wife were true and ran into Molly Foster.”

Roland started and said with a tremble in his voice, “I did my best to keep any gossip of that nature from reaching him, Hannibal.”

“Perhaps you should have told him?” Hannibal asked, eyes slitting open.

“I didn’t wish to frighten him,” Roland said, guilt filling his eyes. “I wanted nothing unpleasant to touch him here. He has had unpleasantness enough in his life, and Melinda has always been your responsibility to explain. I still do not understand it!”

“I did explain. Badly, but I explained all the same,” Hannibal said, thinking of Will’s soft expression and how fragile he’d felt under his fingers. “All the bitter truth of her death and my guilt.”

“And what did he say?” Roland asked, watching Hannibal restlessly clench and unclench his hands.

“He asked about the baby,” Hannibal breathed, and smiled a sad, strained smile. “All of that, and his worry was for the child...”

“Will has a very large, good heart, Hannibal,” Roland said.

Hannibal frowned, then, and quietly asked, “What did happen to her, Grandfather? What happened to Melinda’s daughter? I know you could not place her with the Fosters—”

“No, they wouldn’t have her,” Roland said, grim. “They were distraught and barely able to accept Melinda’s loss. Her mother couldn’t even look at the baby. I arranged placement with a family of landed gentry, Hannibal, and assume she is doing well, as you should.”

“That is sad recollection of her fate, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, unsatisfied by the news he’d just received. “Were circumstances different, I would demand an accounting of her whereabouts, but I have larger worries on my mind, all things considered.”

“We will find who this person threatening Will is, Hannibal,” Roland said. “We will keep him safe.”

Hannibal stared at the ceiling, his thoughts jumbled and agitated.

“I believe it might be a good idea to take Will away from Hartford House,” Roland suggested.

“To the Capital?” Hannibal asked, thinking of the Seasons he’d spent in the ducal townhouse without his little mate.

“Perhaps,” Roland said. “Will has never traveled and it would do him good to be away from Hartford House. When he is well enough, the two of you should take a trip. Go to the seaside or to another estate, someplace unexpected.”

“Tell the servants to pack our trunks and simply go?” Hannibal mused. “Eluding whoever this person is?”

“While we do some investigating here at home,” Roland said. “It will take some time to hire detectives in to assist in the situation.”

“Unpredictable movements would stymie them, whoever they are,” Hannibal said, and sighed heavily. “I wish it were not under these circumstances, but you’re right, Grandfather. It isn’t safe for Will here and new surroundings would do him some good.”

“I will write to the Capital directly to inquire about an investigation,” Roland said. “We will take steps, Hannibal. Between all of us, he needn’t ever be alone and vulnerable to any unknown menace.”

After a long, weighty silence, Hannibal said, “He thought I wished him dead, Grandfather. He truly believed I tried to murder him.”

“But he knows now you did not,” Roland pointed out, gentle with this child who had always been closer to a son than a grandson.

Hannibal didn’t acknowledge his statement. The guilt that had plagued him since his return had found good, fertile ground and its roots reached deep, all the way to the pit of his stomach.

“Have you any idea how he was treated in his father’s house?” he whispered, those terrible scars appearing behind his closed lids.

“Yes,” Roland quietly said. “Jimmy has always been discreet, but he felt it was necessary to inform me.”

“Some of those scars he has couldn’t be more than a few years old, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, disturbed and upset. “He was beaten like an animal until the day he left that house for this one.”

Roland remained quiet, watching his grandson struggle with his newfound knowledge.
“The things I said to him,” Hannibal breathed, and cut himself off, unable to finish.
“You had no idea how he was mistreated.”
“That is not an excuse,” Hannibal said, sitting up and gaining his feet. “Even had he been treated as a prince in his father’s house, it would not excuse it!”
“It would not,” Roland agreed. “But Hannibal, I am not the one who needs to hear you say it.”
Hannibal was startled into looking at him, realization dawning in his amber eyes.
“If you feel you have wronged Will,” Grandfather said, offering him a slight smile. “Then tell him so. Just... just tell him, so.”

Hannibal’s jaw clenched. Just tell him, as if it could ever be so easy as a few words. As if he could take six years of Will’s life from him and erase the pain of it with words.

As if words could ever strip away those scars laid over his skin or the beatings that had put them there, brutal and harsh and unthinkably cruel.

Shaking with the force of repressing his emotions, Hannibal tightly said, “I want that Addendum destroyed.”
Grandfather went still, but his amber eyes glittered with growing tears.
“I want it destroyed,” Hannibal said again, moving to the window, looking out at a landscape that he never even saw. “Hartford House is to remain in Will’s name. I want him to have it, no matter what happens between us. This is his home and there are other places I can go if he does not want me here.”

“He will want you here,” Roland said, almost frightened to say anything lest Hannibal change his mind. “There is a goodness in him, Hannibal, that nothing in his life has ever managed to extinguish. He will want you to remain here at Hartford.”

“What needs to be done to get rid of it?” Hannibal asked, turning to pace before his grandfather again, restless energy returning at even the thought of someone lying in wait to hurt Will.
“I will write to Mr. Buddish requesting all copies of the document be returned to me,” Roland said. “And then we will ensure they are destroyed.”

“How many copies are there?” Hannibal asked, realizing there was much more he needed to take care of before he could even dream of making his home here at Hartford.

“The original, which the two of us signed,” Roland said, “And the clerks always make a copy to send back to me, which has not yet arrived.”
“I need to take a short trip to Galley Field,” Hannibal decided. “I will stop in the Capital on my way and ensure that they receive your correspondence and send them back to you.”

Roland was silent for a long, thoughtful moment before he said, “You are not being thoughtless, Hannibal, are you?”
“No,” Hannibal said, taking a deep breath to calm himself. “No, I’m making a decision, Grandfather, not swanning off for an assignation with my mistress while Will is here facing an unknown threat! I will leave tomorrow morning and be back sometime in the night.”

“That is a long distance to cross in so short a time,” Grandfather reminded him. “You might spend—”
“I will not give him reasons to doubt me,” Hannibal said, grim.

“Then you will stay here at Hartford and be a man worthy of calling Will his spouse?” Roland asked, watching the affect those words had on his grandson.

Hannibal’s gaze snapped up to his, the fire in his eyes fading slightly when he said, “I will stay as long as he will have me, Grandfather, but I doubt I can ever be worthy of him. If life was truly fair and there was any justice in the world, then he would never have to see me again in his life, or any member of his family.”

“Hannibal—”

“Excuse me, Grandfather, I need to speak to Peter,” he said, subdued, and left his grandfather’s suite still struggling to reconcile what his little mate awoke in him with what he knew had yet to be done.
Hannibal headed directly out to the stables once he left his grandfather’s suite, intent on getting some answers or at least satisfying his urge to do something.

Peter was out in the paddock, attempting to shoo a peacock that had managed to gain entry to the grassy area and was strutting about without a care in the world. He straightened when Hannibal called out to him, his pleasant expression clouding with worry.

“Mr. Graham asked me, Lord Clarges,” he stammered, gamely accompanying Hannibal into the stable to survey the situation for himself in the wake of close questioning. “My memory i-isn’t so good sometimes.”

“I know that, Peter, and I do not ask to trouble you,” Hannibal said, judging the security of the tack room to be entirely too lax, considering. “I admit I am not surprised to find that Will was already asking, I only hoped to find out something more.”

“You worry for him,” Peter said, and smiled shyly. “He needs people t-to worry for him. He won’t worry for himself.”

“No, he certainly won’t,” Hannibal agreed, somewhat surprised by the sheer amount of gear they had even after six years of not entertaining. Hartford House was ready to accommodate a hunt at any given moment and kept both horseflesh and gear enough to do so without trouble. “Will’s saddle is not particularly more worn than the others, is it, Peter?”

“No, Lord Clarges,” Peter said, his diffident manner of speaking not tangling him up as much as his nerves began to settle.

“It would require familiarity to pick it out,” Hannibal mused, mouth pursing. “Besides yourself and your stable hands, Peter, I would say there are few who deal much with the tack of our House.”

“Not directly, Lord Clarges,” Peter confirmed. “Of course, Mr. Graham i-is riding a lot and p-people see him, so...”

Hannibal nodded, realizing at once that Peter was right. Will’s saddle was remarkable simply for its lack of embellishment. A working man’s saddle, always near the front of the tack room, seen often by everyone in the surrounding area who had daily dealings with him.

The culprit could be literally anyone.

Aggravated that he was no closer now than he had been before, Hannibal said, “Be sure you keep the tack room locked up, Peter, and the keys on your person. I know it’s inconvenient for the staff, but we will all manage for Will’s sake.”

Peter nodded, blinking owlishly, his brow furrowed as if he was troubled.

“Peter?” Hannibal prompted, noticing it. “Have you remembered something?”

He shook his head. It seemed hasty and emphatic, but realization dawned when Peter said, “H-how long before he’s okay again?”

“There is no way to tell,” Hannibal said, deflating when he realized he wasn’t about to get any further information on Will’s saddle. “It could be days, or weeks.”

“He’ll miss it,” Peter breathed, more to himself than to Hannibal, who only looked at him with raised eyebrows, waiting clarification which Peter gave, nervous again. “Mr. Graham wanted to be told when A-Athena starts to whelp.”

Peter nodded, blinking owlishly, his brow furrowed as if he was troubled.

“Peter?” Hannibal prompted, noticing it. “Have you remembered something?”

Hannibal asked, drawing a blank, though the wording told him she was a dog. “Will has an interest in puppies?”

“Mr. Graham loves dogs. He takes Athena with him on his rounds sometimes,” Peter said, smiling. “He said he’ll help me find homes for the pups. M-Mr. Verger always got rid of them.”

“Mr. Verger was a menace and a monster,” Hannibal said, glowering with dislike at even the mention of his name. “But, unfortunately, Will is much too ill to come all the way down here just now and I wouldn’t risk his scolding to carry him. By the time they are big enough for new homes, I am sure he will be right as rain.”

Peter’s brow wrinkled up just shade, and his voice was soft and hesitant when he asked, “S-so you don’t mind?”

“This is Will’s home, Peter, and if he’s told you that you may keep the lot of them, then I suppose we’ll have ten new dogs, though the hunting hounds will no doubt object,” Hannibal said. “Whatever makes him happy is perfectly fine by me.”

Peter seemed vastly relieved on that count, tension sliding from his lanky frame.

“As Mr. Graham asked, Peter, please come to us if you remember anything at all that might help,” Hannibal said, preparing to go back and check once more on Will.

“I-I will, Lord Clarges,” Peter said, twisting his fingers into his loose pants, a habit that was familiar to Hannibal from his earliest memories of Hartford House, even before Peter’s accident. “I p-promise you both. I just... my memory.”

“I know, Peter, it’s no fault of yours,” Hannibal assured him, and clasped his bony shoulder once, warmly, in a gesture he rarely used. “Will’s safety is my highest priority now and I need everyone’s help.”
Peter nodded and quickly ducked his head, leaving without another word to return to the paddock and the bawling peacock. He absently watched Peter, still musing on the fact that Will apparently liked dogs, but the thought quickly lost out to the urge to check on his mate.

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Hannibal heard a commotion before he saw one, and hit the landing to find a small gathering in the hallway. Jimmy Price stood blocking the doorway to Hannibal’s suite with the tenacity of a bulldog, refusing to allow either Lady Rathmore or her Alpha accompaniment, Francis Dolarhyde, access.

“And I am telling you that I couldn’t give two figs who you are, Mr. Graham is not to be disturbed and no one will disturb him!” Jimmy said, and with admirable ferocity, no matter the outrage he incited.

“Now you listen to me—”

“Lady Rathmore, the populace of the neighboring county is listening to you right now, willingly or not,” Hannibal said, wading into the fray with a dark look at Francis, who bristled like a fighting dog and just barely fell back, the brimstone tang of his scent heavy and revolting to Hannibal.

“What have you done to him?” Mina demanded, looking suspiciously well put together for still being in her dressing gown, which she clutched dramatically at her throat. “Did I not tell you, Francis? He has killed him!”

“Lady Rathmore, I have never murdered anyone on this country’s soil,” Hannibal informed her. “Pray don’t make me regret it.”

She drew up, affronted, and hissed, “And now you will threaten me?! How dare you!”

“Your brother is suffering a concussion from that nasty fall he took,” Hannibal said, rapidly out of patience with her. “What that means, my dear, is that noise and light and movement all provoke nausea and pain. Currently, you are manufacturing a good deal of noise, so if you value your brother even a pinch of what you seem, you will be quiet.”

“My brother is precious to me, Lord Clarges,” she said, but did lower her voice to a harsh whisper. “I fear for his safety every second he is in your care!”

“And did you fear so much for him in your father’s care?” Hannibal asked, satisfied to see a vivid blush fill her face, which was altogether too like Will’s for his comfort. It was a wonder to him that two people could share such identical faces and yet be so vastly different.

Jimmy only removed himself from the doorway when Hannibal stirred to go in, and even then he did so reluctantly, clearly suspicious of both Will’s sister as well as Francis.

“I cannot believe you would treat a gentlewoman with such disrespect!” she said, retreating a few steps. “I am a lady, Lord Clarges!”

“I can only take your word for it,” Hannibal said, but the anger that flashed across her face made him regret being so sharp with her. She was Will’s sister, his twin, and regardless of her father’s sins, she cared enough for him to challenge Hannibal in his own house.

With as little hostility as he could muster, he said, “Forgive me, Lady Rathmore. Your brother’s accident has me at less than my best in my worry for him. You are his sister, and by extension you are my sister. Please accept my apology.”

She tipped her chin, a subtle version of Will’s mulish expression on her face, but gamely said, “I accept your apology, Lord Clarges. As you can imagine, I am extremely concerned for my dear brother! I wish to be informed the moment he wakes!”

“Of course,” Hannibal said, watching her flounce back the way she had come just to make sure she did, in fact, return to her suite.

Francis, however, lingered on the landing, not quite managing to look at anyone, but not quite managing to be less menacing.

“Mr. Dolarhyde,” Hannibal said, leveling a flat look at him. “You are dismissed.”

“I’ve been tasked to look after him,” Francis said, the deference in his soft voice at complete odds with his looming presence. “My Lord.”

Hannibal had little difficulty seeing why Jimmy disliked him.
“You have no cause to fear for Will’s safety here,” Hannibal said. His full mouth pursed with thought then, and he added, “Unless you know more than you’re telling.”

Francis met his gaze, a brief, hard glance that skirted the edge of a challenge and raised Hannibal’s hackles in a way he thoroughly hated.

“He’s spent all his life with Alphas like you,” Francis said, and ducked his head again, a show of contrition that did not quite carry over to sincerity. “I only wish to keep him safe.”

Hannibal blinked, doing his best to remember that Mina and her servants had been invited to stay at his mate’s request, no matter their behavior.

“I understand your sentiment, I even share it,” Hannibal said, getting another furtive flick of those dangerous blue eyes. “But I am Master in this house, and you will obey me. Go make yourself useful downstairs, Francis. Will is my mate, and I will ensure his safety.”

Reluctant and nearly defiant, Francis backed towards the servants’ stairs and only settled there to glare at them, hands crossed before him. Hannibal darkly considered thrashing him for his disobedience, but in all honesty it wasn’t his place and if the watchful, menacing Alpha would even marginally help keep Will safe, then he would strive to tolerate him.

“Well that peeled a good ten years off me, I’ll tell you,” Jimmy quietly breathed, fanning his nose as if he had caught that sulfuric scent himself, though Hannibal imagined it was more a visceral reaction than a scent-based one.

“Thank you for holding the door, Jimmy,” Hannibal told him. “Will is sleeping?”

“Was, by now, my Lord,” Jimmy said, back to brisk business. “I imagine the clamor woke him. If he’s hurting half as bad as I imagine he is, he’ll be grateful rather than angry you sent her off, my Lord.”

“I certainly hope so,” Hannibal said, feeling as if he might have an ally in Jimmy, if only because of their common ground regarding Will and his safety. He angled a meaningful glance at the servants’ passage and the hulking, glowering Alpha stationed there, “Keep an eye on him, if you would. I don’t trust him.”

“I know precisely what you mean, my Lord,” Jimmy said, straightening his jacket. “If Mr. Graham needs anything at all, please allow me to take care of it. He gets very uncomfortable around strangers and that valet of yours is all elbows and feet.”

Hannibal chuckled softly at that, dully warned, and sent Jimmy on his way.

Berger was on high alert just inside the doorway when he made his way inside, Hannibal was pleased to see. He closed the heavy wooden panel quietly behind him and asked, “Any problems?”

“None, m’Lord, though his Lordship’s sleep ain’t what I’d call peaceful,” Berger whispered, nodding in Will’s direction.

Will was fast asleep in the chair Hannibal had left him in. He made his way over to his sleeping mate, smiling at the way he lay slumped to one side with one arm dangling, the muscle of his forearm firm and solid to the graceful curve of his wrist. He looked picturesque but not the least bit comfortable.

Hannibal dismissed Berger back to his duties and the valet closed the door silently behind him.

“Let’s get you settled,” Hannibal murmured, delving beneath the blanket to find his tucked-up legs, managing to hook him behind his knees and heft him up, blanket and all.

Will murmured something in his sleep and curled against him, nuzzling against Hannibal’s throat and subsiding with a soft sigh that brought a smile to Hannibal’s mouth.

Silently, he carried Will to his bed and eased him down where Berger had turned down the covers, laying him onto his side with care not to pain him. It was impulse more than intention that prompted Hannibal to sit there next to him, absently combing his fingers through Will’s silky hair, thoughtful and pensive.

“Grandfather is right,” he murmured, careful not to wake him, though he doubted nothing less than an ecstatic parade band could if Lady Rathmore’s screeching had not. “You are the one who needs to hear it.”

But it wasn’t just for Will, he knew.

All of his life he’d treated every Omega who crossed his path as nothing more than an inconvenient annoyance, an effigy of the woman who had ruined his father, not as human beings with feelings that could be hurt and fears that could be realized.

Or pains that could be borne privately and silently and with extreme bravery, from the battlefields across the sea to the violence done in the one place a child should be safe—their parents’ keeping.
Hannibal knew too well the effects an unstable household could have on one's person. He never dreamed that he would share such unhappy common ground with his little mate.

Will flinched in his sleep, rolling onto his side towards Hannibal, balled fists tucked beneath his chin. A ferocious furrow wrinkled his brow, his dreams, perhaps, not as pleasant a respite as they should be.

“I have soundly wronged you,” Hannibal whispered, sliding his fingers to Will’s damp and heated nape, rubbing the base of his skull until Will sighed, the furrow smoothing. “I would very much like to get to know you, Will Graham.”

He could only hope, after everything, that Will would wish to know him in return.

Will could hear the ocean again, an angry roar like flames, consuming everything flung into its greedy maw. The wind plucked and tugged at his hair painfully, but it wasn't nearly as painful as the tightness in his chest.

‘Give him what he wants,’ his father said, shoving him towards the edge.

Will caught himself there, toes curling on the sharp rock, the black ocean and frothy caps roiling against the jagged stones below.

‘Father, please don’t!’ he cried, his balance threatened by the hand pushing him from behind. He turned and was a child again, looking up at the man who seemed to fill the world with his presence.

‘You’ve been in your sister’s things again’!

‘I haven’t, father!’ Will cried, denying it, terrified because he hadn’t. He hadn’t. But when he looked down, he was wearing Mina’s favorite day dress, the dress he’d been married to Hannibal in.

He looked up to explain himself, but it was Hannibal there before him, the sheer disgust on his face making Will’s tight chest ache.

‘You are vile to me, disgusting. Get out. Out of my sight. Out of my house. Out.’

His hands shot out and shoved Will, sent him tumbling backwards off of the cliff where that tightness in his chest burst open, an unwanted rupture Will’s frantic hands could not contain.

‘Will...’

‘I’m sorry!’ he said, gathering up the pieces of the teacup he’d shattered. Blood dripped on them from his chest and he trembled, sobbing, ‘I can’t make them fit. They won’t fit. I’m sorry, I can’t fix it...’

“Will...”

They wouldn’t go back together, no matter how he tried...

“Will?”

He woke, realizing that someone was calling his name. For a moment he did not recognize the room he was in and he sat up too fast, wincing slightly at the protest in his spine that seemed substantially better for his rest.

“You were having a nightmare,” Hannibal said, drawing Will’s attention to the fireplace where his husband sat with a book open in his lap. It was so like the night that he had routed Will from the House that he flinched, dropping his gaze from Hannibal’s inquiring one.

Hannibal closed his book and put it aside before rising.

“How do you feel?” he asked, crossing the short distance to the bed where his uneasy mate was sitting, twisting and untwisting the sheets in his long, pale fingers, still half lost in his dreams. “You woke once and I gave you some painkiller. Has it helped?”

“Yes,” Will said, cautious not to nod in case it should wake the slumbering ache in his neck. “It seems to have. Thank you. What time is it?”

Hannibal checked his pocket watch, turning the face towards the firelight before saying, “Nearly four. Grandfather and your sister will be taking tea in the garden, if you feel well enough to join them. The fresh air would do you good and there is plenty of shade, as you know.”

Will hesitated, then asked, “Will you be joining us?”
“I wouldn’t intrude if you’d rather I didn’t,” Hannibal said, easing down at the foot of the bed, one hand idly dropping to rest on Will’s ankle, his warmth discernible even through the layers of sheets and blankets. “I’ve been tending to some estate business while you were resting. There is plenty more to do there.”

“There is always plenty more to do,” Will breathed, smiling ruefully.

“I could have Berger bring it in to tea,” Hannibal suggested, heartened when Will did not immediately accept his absence. “You could tell me what should be done.”

Will’s brows rose. Surprised, he asked, “Instruction from an Omega, Hannibal? However will you survive it?”

“You know a great deal more about it than I do,” Hannibal said, his grin baring his sharp Alpha fangs. “I’ll ring for Jimmy.”

“Thank you,” Will said, watching him pass through their shared washroom to pull the call bell. He worked his feet out from beneath the heavy nest of blankets and gingerly stood, much relieved when the world held still for him and the movement did not pain him.

The bright afternoon sun spilling in from the Duchess suite dimmed as he made his way through the washroom, toes curled against the cold tiles. He found Hannibal drawing the drapes just enough to make the light less invasive.

“I’ve instructed Jimmy in regards to pain medicine,” Hannibal said, tugging the last drape into place. The room was still fairly bright, but he noted that Will was not flinching from it, which was a good sign in his book. “You need to let one of us know when you start hurting. Don’t wait until it’s too much to bear, or it won’t be as effective.”

“It’s already much improved,” Will said, and when Hannibal began to glower, he added, “But I will do so, Hannibal, thank you. I have no desire to indulge my aching head. I cannot bear to be incapacitated. Idleness is intolerable to me.”

“It doesn’t much suit me, either,” Hannibal, lingering next to the window as if reluctant to leave. After a long silence, he finally said, “Will, there is something I need to tell you—”

A knock on the door interrupted them, at once an inconvenience and a relief to them both, as Hannibal did not relish confessing to Will the things he knew he needed to.

But he knew it was necessary. There were a great many things he needed to tell Will, not the least of which was that Hartford House would always be his home, no matter what, that nothing and no one would ever take that away from him.

Hannibal moved to unlock the door and Jimmy came in. The pleasant, smiling valet immediately froze, asking, “Is it a bad time?”

“No, Jimmy, please come in,” Will said, bewildered by what had just happened and wondering what could cause such concern to cross Hannibal’s handsome face. He sent an inquiring glance Hannibal’s way, brow furrowing, and his husband briskly moved past him, saying, “I will wait and escort you down to tea.”

Will turned, frowning as the washroom door quietly closed behind Hannibal, wondering what on earth his husband had been about to say and why he felt so strangely reluctant to hear it.

Roland did not particularly like Lady Rathmore.

To be honest, he hadn’t tried that hard. He’d seen people like Mina come and go in his long lifetime and had little patience for the wide-eyed innocence she attempted to offer, a veneer of gentility cracking over the scaly green-eyed dragon of jealousy which lay beneath.

She glanced at him from beneath her lashes and took another dainty sip of her tea.

“It is very good of you to come keep your brother company, Mina,” he said, and added with a smile, “I do hope you don’t mind me using your given name? After all, we are family through your darling brother, whom I have come to love as much as my own dear grandchildren.”

The veneer cracked wider at that.

Roland smiled and sipped his tea.

“How dreadfully dull you must find the country, Your Grace,” she said, politely skirting the issue of her name. “Cooped up at Hartford for six years. Your grandson has been having such fun in the Capital in your stead.”
“I am very happy here at Hartford, young lady, so long as I have Will’s company,” Roland said, finding that for all their similarities the two of them were no more twins than they were friends. “I wouldn’t wish to put my grandson to shame by joining him in the Capital. He should have some time in the spotlight without me outdoing him, hm?”

She absorbed that, thoughts flicking rapidly across her face in a minute play of expression. Roland took another sip, just waiting to see what she would use to fill the silence.

“Your Grace, I would never wish to betray my brother’s confidence, but I fear things are not at all well with him and I worry so terribly much about his state of mind,” she said, settling her teacup into its saucer and summoning a woeful look that Roland paid prompt, polite attention to. “You see... I am afraid Will believes your grandson is trying to harm him.”

Roland’s brow rose. He, too, put his cup down and steepled his fingers, wondering how much rope she would need to finish herself.

“I would never wish to alarm you, but I worry that he might... react badly,” she breathed, looking the very picture of frail dismay. “Will has always been so unpredictable. If he feels threatened—”

“I expect he will beat me with a poker,” Hannibal said, emerging from the shadow of the conservatory doors and moving towards them with a swift, sure stride, his wry and amused gaze fixed on Mina. “Seeking counsel with my grandfather, Lady Rathmore?”

She had the good grace to blush and hastily picked up her teacup again.

“I do not fancy myself a gardener, as I lack Will’s talent for multitasking,” Hannibal said, settling at the grand table the servants had set up in the shade for their tea. “But for the sake of nipping buds, Will and I have already spoken at length about his various accidents which I have, in turn, conveyed both to Grandfather as well as the staff.”

She cleared her throat and said with a soft smile, “I was merely expressing my worry for Will. You did mention he was violent with you.”

“I never said it was unprovoked,” Hannibal said, waiting for his cup to be filled.

“Is Will joining us?” Roland asked, amused to see Will’s sister stymied in her scheming, though he couldn’t imagine what she’d hoped to gain with it.

“Yes, I had hoped to go over some estate business but I don’t think he should be pushed,” Hannibal said, settling to his tea. “He got a little dizzy while dressing. He insisted Jimmy would bring him down momentarily.”

“Perhaps he should stay abed?” Roland asked.

“Only if you’re the one to tell him so,” Hannibal said, smirking. He gestured at his stitches and added, “I have no wish to match my other cheek.”

“I meant to inquire earlier, Lord Clarges, what on earth happened to your face?” Mina asked, turning her attention to Hannibal.

“Ah! Here he is now,” Hannibal said, excusing himself to meet Will on the path.

Roland silently watched the consternation fill Mina’s face, her personality so vastly different from the twin whose features she shared.

“You seem bewildered, Mina,” he said, cocking his head to smile at her.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she admitted, her delicate brows drawing down. She realized he was watching her and summoned a soft smile in return, admitting with a becoming blush, “I was so frightened for him all these years, Your Grace, considering my father sent you the wrong child.”

“Oh, allow me to set your mind at ease on that count,” Roland said, dropping a wink at her. “He sent me precisely the child I wished for.”

She flushed to her hairline so floridly that Will, upon his arrival, asked her if she was ill.

“I am afraid the doings at Hartford House are something of a surprise for your dear sister,” Roland said, delighted to see Hannibal escorting Will with appropriate attentiveness, taking pains not to overwhelm him. It gave him painful, deep hope that all would yet be well between them, though he would never dare give voice to such.

“If you will excuse me,” Mina said, surging to her feet. “I do not feel at all well.”

Will stared after her, puzzled by her abrupt retreat. Hannibal barely noticed her departure, and certainly missed the look she cast back over her shoulder, a slight glimpse to see if her exit had been marked.
No, Roland most decidedly did not like Lady Rathmore.
But he never had been much for dragons.

The warm breeze in the shade and the soft twittering of birds in Hartford’s overhanging trees proved to be more refreshing than Will could have hoped. He seated himself at Grandfather’s right, surprised when Hannibal moved to push in his chair, but not minding it. He wondered if it was the knock on his head working on him, but he honestly wasn’t sure. There was something… compelling about Hannibal’s concern, and it certainly made a pleasant change from their usual battles.

“My dear, you are a sight for sore eyes!” Roland said, lightly kissing Will’s knuckles as he often liked to do.

Hannibal settled across from Will and motioned for service, trying to unobtrusively keep an eye on Will for signs of strain.

“I am glad I could join you, Grandfather,” Will said, smiling at the gesture and murmuring thanks to the servant who filled his cup. “I wish I felt well enough to pour for you.”

“Nonsense! The staff can handle it!” Roland assured him.

Will’s brow furrowed when he looked at Mina’s conspicuously empty seat. Concerned, he asked, “Did my sister make mention of anything that might be troubling her?”

Hannibal’s mouth pursed and he, too, looked at her empty seat, saying, “Ah! I hadn’t realized she’d gone; I thought she was being unusually quiet.”

“Hannibal,” Will said, disapproving.

“Nothing you could sort for her, Will, I’m afraid,” Roland said, tucking into his favorite little sandwiches. “I dare say she will get over what is ailing her.”

“‘Nonsense!’ Will said, not sure if he was up for the dramatics that usually accompanied Mina’s illnesses.

“I believe dying of envy is a manner of speech, rather than an actual demise one may meet,” Roland said, amused by the spasm of confusion that marred Will’s brow. “Your sister is fine, Will. Her understanding of the world has developed contours she doesn’t understand. She most definitely will live, as we all do with such realizations. Now, I’ve been informed your accidents have a more sinister purpose than I was first led to believe. Shall we discuss that? I do feel it is more important, in the grand scheme of things, than the lovely Lady Rathmore.”

“All of you go inside, please,” Hannibal said to the staff, pushing Will’s teacup a bit closer and adding a few little sandwiches to his empty plate.

“In the matter of my spill down the stairs,” Will said, putting out a protective hand to prevent Hannibal from adding a third. “I did mention to Hannibal my thoughts that whoever pushed me down the stairs took advantage of an opportunity. They had no way of knowing I would wake and confront them. I cannot venture a guess as to their purpose, but it was not my death.”

“We were discussing just the same thing,” Hannibal mused, plucking a few sandwiches for his own lovely plate. “The question is, what were they doing on the family floor that would align with potentially killing you? No tryst is worth murdering witnesses over, and no servant would dare come down to our rooms for such a thing.”

“I have a difficult time imagining any member of Hartford’s staff would wish me harm,” Will said, blanching to think of it. He took a shallow sip of his tea, but it didn’t settle well.

“You shouldn’t think such things,” Roland said, patting his hand. “There is no member of this household that would wish to hurt you, Will. To that end, Hannibal and I have concocted a plan.”

“A plan?” Will echoed, lifting his weary blue gaze.

“With your permission, of course,” Hannibal said, hastening to assure Will he would not pluck him up and cart him off. Will’s head turned slightly to include him in a stare that was rapidly growing glassy with exhaustion.

“When you are well enough to travel, I think it would be wise to remove to another estate,” Hannibal said.

“Steal away in the dark unnoticed?” Will asked, arching a disapproving brow.

“Something of that sort,” Roland said, dabbing at his lips with his napkin. “I propose that on the morning Hannibal deems you fit enough to travel without aggravating your condition, the two of you simply instruct your respective valets to pack your trunks and leave as soon as possible, telling no one your intended destination.”
Will sighed softly, disliking the necessity of such a thing. “And how will that solve the issue of who is behind it?” “I will be looking into that matter,” Roland said. “Mr. Hawkes and Mrs. Henderson are thoroughly interviewing the servants as we speak for anything they might have seen or heard.” “I should be the one sorting this,” Will said, frustrated. “As your husband, I should be the one,” Hannibal interjected. “But since we cannot put our heads together here and do so without keeping you at risk, our leaving is the only viable option.” “It feels dishonest,” Will said, nibbling at a sandwich. It was delicious enough to goad him to do it justice in a few small bites. “There is nothing dishonest in strategy, Will, as you well know,” Hannibal said, adding another sandwich to his place, which earned him a glower but no protests. “Grandfather is sending to the Capital for detectives to assist his efforts in our absence. They will be running down leads and investigating these accidents to find out how they connect.” “I will see that you get it,” Roland said. “It might yield something useful.” “I will will see that you get it,” Will told him, absently rubbing at his head, a fine sheen of sweat rising on his skin. He put the remnants of his second sandwich down and took a few swallows of his tea, hoping it would all settle. “I have no idea if he can offer any additional insight, but Matthew Brown is the one who informed me my saddle had been tampered with.” “I will be sure they are told of it,” Roland said, and urged them, “Come, now, children, do this fine service justice! Mrs. Pimms will be beside herself if her efforts go to waste!” “You may mark this date for posterity, Will, because I agree with Grandfather,” Hannibal said. “You need to eat, and to drink as much tea as you can.” “I would like to do so but my head is disagreeing,” Will said, taking a shaky breath. He resisted the urge to rub his aching neck, but knew his stiff posture was betraying him to Hannibal’s practiced gaze. “Mrs. Pimms’ porridge was very satisfying.” “Then I will ask—” “No, thank you,” Will said, uncertain if he was up to the task. “I can wait for supper, Hannibal... but my head is beginning to bother me again.” It was such a small thing, his quiet offering of that information, but Hannibal couldn’t help but feel glad that Will had done so. “Grandfather,” he said, wiping his mouth and rising. “If you’ll excuse us, please?” “Please don’t miss your tea for my sake—” “Yes, yes, both of you do whatever you need to do to take care of that headache, and I will pray for a speedy recovery for you, Will,” Roland said, delighted when Hannibal moved to Will’s side, ready to steady him should he grow dizzy. “I will put a dent in these little darlings and Mrs. Pimms will never know the difference. If you would ring Zeller for me, please?” “I will, Grandfather,” Will said, his relief to be going inside almost palpable. “It’s the least I can do for disrupting your tea.” “You’ve done nothing of the sort, just get some rest and feel better,” Roland said, watching them as they made their way back inside, his memories transforming them for an aching heartbeat into himself and Charles. He was so lost in his musings he didn’t realize that Zeller had arrived until he plopped down at the table and started serving himself. “Brat,” Roland sighed, taking a few more sandwiches for himself. “Be useful and pour my tea.” Zeller poured for them both, grinning at the chastisement. “Have you been looking into matters, as I asked?” “Don’t I do everything you ask?” Zeller shot back, poking a small sandwich into his mouth. He swallowed it virtually whole and chased it with a swig of his tea. When he looked back at Roland, it was with the steady, no-nonsense gaze Roland knew meant he was finally being serious. “I still don’t get how you knew he was coming here.” “Zeller, I am an old man who once had many enemies,” Roland said. “Once. It took very little effort to realize that if Lady Rathmore was asking Anthony about Will after six years of silence, she was up to no good. It is always wise to be in possession of the facts.” Zeller’s brows shot up and he smirked. “You never cease to amaze me.” “I am not doing it for your benefit,” Roland reminded him, and rapped the table with his fingers. “Out with it.”
“Francis Dolarhyde got chased out of the mills up north,” Zeller said. “Not sure why yet but I got somebody working on it. Guess where he was before.”

Roland picked his cup up and fixed Zeller with a repressive look. “You know very well I don’t like guessing games and I despise not knowing things. It’s why you’re allowed to get away with murder, you scamp. You’re just a hair more useful to me than you are a thorn in my side!”

Zeller grinned and ate another little sandwich, but in actual bites this time.

“He was a stable hand at the Graham place. Lived with his grandmother until he was in his teens; she was the family housekeeper, a real battle ax.”

Another sandwich, another sip of tea. Roland waited patiently, knowing how Zeller enjoyed testing the patience of everyone around him.

“There was some kind of accident there, no one would give the girl I sent any specifics,” Zeller finally said. “Mr. Graham got hurt and Francis left, did a stint in the Navy overseas. Never made it back for granny’s funeral.”

Roland frowned. “I thought he might have been a military man. I wish it laid my fears to rest.”

“Well, it shouldn’t,” Zeller said. “He earned a dishonorable discharge and a prison sentence. Somebody at port didn’t like the way he looked, Dolarhyde rearranged his face for him.”

“That certainly settled it,” Roland said, feeling even more uneasy now than he had been, and his initial unease had been bad enough.

“I’d say so; he rearranged it all the way off, nearly killed him,” Zeller said, beating Roland to the last sandwich. “He tried the mills after his release but didn’t last there, either. Lady Rathmore tracked him down after and he’s been her constant companion ever since.”

“Companion?”

“No proof,” Zeller said, and added with a grin, “yet. But I’m working on it.”

“I know, you’re a good boy, Zeller, appearances notwithstanding,” Roland said, earning a guffaw from his valet.

“Oh, another thing—you’re going to love this—he got himself a big tattoo on his back while he was in service,” Zeller said, and wagged his brows with a grin. “It’s your favorite.”

“A dragon?” Roland asked, annoyed by Zeller’s delighted nod. “Of course it would be. Tell me, my boy, what do you make of him?”

Zeller shrugged. “He’s big and he’s dangerous and I don’t like him.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Roland said, frowning. “But then I never have cared much for dragons.”

Chapter 22

Will thought that Hannibal would take him back to the ducal suite.

‘Please stay...’

It was a possibility that was as daunting as it was compelling, and the closer they got to the doors, the more pensive Will became.

Hannibal could feel the tension humming through Will’s slender body, even just through the light touch he kept at the base of Will’s spine. It wasn’t hard to guess the cause. As much as it disappointed him to do so, he escorted Will to the Duchess suite and unlocked his door, swinging it wide to admit him with a slight gesture.

Will exhaled softly, relieved and oddly disappointed, but knowing it was for the best. He was ill and tired and in no state to be tied into nerves over such trifling things when his defenses were so badly unprepared.

‘Only an Omega would worry about being bedded at a time like this...’

The thought sounded far too much like his father’s words in his father’s voice for Will’s comfort, and he took a step away from Hannibal’s lingering touch to gather himself. The fact that he wanted to stay close to his husband was reason enough to call for distance. His illness made him far too vulnerable to his own nature—he could not trust himself not to make more of Hannibal’s attentiveness than was actually there.
Hannibal watched him, feeling Will moving further and further from him in a way that had nothing to do with rooms or cities. The feeling of Will’s warm, bare skin tingled on his fingertips, branded there and seared into his memory, and he clenched his hands around it as if he might lose that, as well.

He steadied himself, not wishing to push his presence on his husband, and moved instead to Will’s vanity where a second bottle of headache medicine had been placed by Jimmy Price, conveniently next to a pitcher and delicate little cup.

“It’s fairly early still, so you should have another before you go to bed for the evening,” he said, his voice vibrating in the silence between them, low and husky. He mixed the medicine with the ease of long practice and brought the cup to his contemplative mate.

Will took it with murmured thanks and sipped it, grimacing at the bitter flavor.

“The headache will, unfortunately, be fairly nagging for some time,” Hannibal warned, making sure he drank the entirety of it down. “But the more you drink, and rest, the better it will go for you. Be sure to let me know if you start feeling dizzy when you stand up.”

“I will, thank you, Hannibal. I am clear on the restrictions,” Will said, the words breathed softly so as not to tempt the ache back to life. “I only hope this subsides quickly.”

Hannibal made a gesture at Jimmy when he poked his head in, sending him to Will’s dressing room where the valet fetched fresh nightclothes and Will’s robe.

“Jimmy will get you settled,” Hannibal said, taking the glass from Will and putting it on the nightstand. “Is the binding on your ribs adequate?”

“Yes,” Will said, touching his side where the bottom of the binding reached. “It did make a substantial difference in the pain. Thank you for suggesting it.”

“I am a doctor, Will,” Hannibal said, a rueful smile curving his mouth. “I should hope after this long I would give sound advice on medical matters.”

Will smiled, tight and perfunctory, too many questions swimming in his large blue eyes, the tendrils of distrust creeping in to steal away the warmth that had built between them. That uncanny mind of his was working, Hannibal knew; dissecting what he had learned, what he had shown, and trying to establish where he fell on the scale of Hannibal’s perception. The fearful, abhorrent weakness again, as if Will could ever be such a thing.

“I will be in my suite working on the estate business that’s built up,” Hannibal said, searching for any sign that the small kernel of trust between them was not altogether lost, merely dancing out of reach.

Will just offered a cautious, “Yes.”

Hannibal took a deep breath, weighing his options, his Alpha nature at war with itself. He wanted to reach out, to soothe the pain he could feel in his mate, to be near him and protect him. But just as strong was the need to give Will the room he was so clearly asking for, the space to draw an easy breath and think, to respect his right to his privacy.

Lingering in one last attempt to reach his mate, he asked, “Is your neck bothering you again?”

“Some,” Will said, moving another step away from him towards the covered window.

“If you were comfortable with such a thing,” Hannibal said, aware of Jimmy noisily fussing in the dressing room to give them privacy. “I could wait for you to change and work on your back and neck again. It might help chase the pain away sooner and help you sleep.”

He could sense Will considering it, haunted by the shadowy presence of Will’s father there between them as if the man himself had slipped into the room, cruel and baleful, coaxing Hannibal’s mate into believing that the basic human need to be cared for was nothing more than an embarrassing display of bad behavior.

Will didn’t turn around. It didn’t surprise Hannibal in the least when he said, “You’re very kind to offer, Hannibal, but I can bear it.”

It took him a long moment to whisper, “Is it preferable to bear that pain rather than my touch?”

Something shuddered and ached within him when Will said nothing, only ducked his head, his long curls shifting over his neckerchief and collar.

Hannibal nodded, even though Will couldn’t see him. It was the only reaction he could manage before manners took over.
“I have overstepped, Will. I apologize. I’ll be just next door if you need me,” he said, moving to the washroom door, doing his best to conceal his disappointment. “I will have guards posted outside of your door for your safety. Please don’t mind them.”

Will felt him hesitate there, felt the weight of Hannibal’s amber gaze on his back. The urge to call him back was so strong that he clenched his teeth, eyes sweeping closed to squeeze hard. He heard the quiet click of the washroom door and released a shuddering sigh, wishing that he could have accepted that invitation without risking his nature responding.

But it was too dangerous and his father’s lessons had taught him too well that he could ill afford to allow his Omegan instincts the slightest outlet. He had been drawn alarmingly far down the path already in the midst of his pain and vulnerability with Hannibal.

‘Given so much as a pinch of wiggle room,’ his father had said, slapping his belt into his palm for emphasis, ‘you will fall down the road to ruin and end up nothing more than a harlot begging in the street!’

“Mr. Graham?”

“Yes, Jimmy,” Will said, startled out of his thoughts by his valet urging him into his dressing room.

He was thoughtful and weary and uncertain as he was helped out of his clothing into his nightclothes. Jimmy kindly did not attempt to make conversation, merely helped him change, mindful to put more salve on his bruises with gentle care.

Before Jimmy left, Will said, “There was a letter in my jacket from this morning, Jimmy. Do you know what happened to it?”

“Yes, indeed, I meant to ask you what you’d like me to do with it,” Jimmy said, settling Will on his bed and vanishing back into the dressing room. He returned with the letter, wrinkled and bent from its ill-fated journey. “Would you like me to post it?”

“No, Jimmy, thank you, just bring it to me, please,” Will said.

Jimmy handed it over with a soft, “There we are! Will there be anything more for now, Mr. Graham?”

“No, that will do, thank you,” Will said, clutching the letter tightly and stifling a yawn. “I’ll ring you if I need anything. I think I might need to nap again.”

“You get all the rest you need, Mr. Graham,” Jimmy said, smiling at him. “We’re all here to watch over you!”

He let himself out and Will sighed in the ensuing silence, his aches already fading beneath the strength of the medicine Hannibal had given him. He idly rubbed at the envelope in his hand, and was only just considering shredding it when a soft knock came at his door.

“Yes, come in,” he called, rubbing his temple opposite where the goose egg rose. He dropped his hand, surprised to his sister admitting herself, and asked, “Mina, is something the matter?”

“I wanted to check on you,” she said, teary-eyed and pale.

“I should have checked on you,” Will said. “It was remiss of me not to do so. You left the table so suddenly, are you unwell?”

“I apologize for leaving so abruptly, I was just so frightened for you, Will,” she said, trembling there just inside his suite, as if unsure she had the right to approach him. “I had an attack of nerves when I saw your husband go to you, pretending he has a care in the world for your safety! He would not let me see you—”

She cut off, pressing a lace-edged handkerchief to her face.

“Mina,” Will said, and patted the bed beside him. “Here, come here.”

She crossed the room with small, frantic steps to sit next to him and Will covered her trembling hand in his. He rubbed her fingers with his own, sitting with her in uncertain silence.

“What is this?” she asked, her voice thick with tears. She plucked at the corner of the letter idly, toying with it.

“A letter I wrote to Mr. Brauner this morning… so much has changed since then. I asked him to see to it that my death was investigated, should anything happen to me,” Will said. “I’m relieved I didn’t make it to the post. It would be terribly embarrassing trying to explain my fears now.”

“Send it!” Mina insisted, trying to pull it from his fingers, but Will held fast, refusing. “Heavens! Send one to everyone you know! There is no telling what might next befall you!”
“Mina, stop! I’ll do nothing of the sort!” Will told her, moving it out of her reach to place it on his nightstand. He took both her hands in his and said with every bit of honesty in him, “Hannibal and I have had a discussion regarding my accidents. He is not responsible on any count, Mina.”

“That’s absurd!” she said, pulling her hands away to stare at him, aghast. “Will! Honestly! You confessed you knew his plans and he told you he was not responsible?”

“Yes,” Will said, careful not to nod. “He was greatly surprised—”

“Surprised you knew, you mean?” she snapped, upset. “And what? He gave you his word he had done nothing?”

“Mina, even Hannibal could not manufacture such a response,” Will said, his tenderness for her rapidly wearing beneath the weight of her suspicions and the lingering pain of his aching head, neck, and back. “Please trust that I have spoken with him and judged that he is telling me the truth.”

“Trust your judgment, Will?” she breathed, turning to cup his face. “When I know your bond to him would drive you to defend any horror he might visit on you?”

Will blinked, pained by that statement, and asked in a strained whisper, “Why do you distrust him so, Mina?”

“Because I love you so, Will,” she answered without hesitation. “I cannot believe, considering his past, considering what he is capable of, that he would be above lying to you. When I tried to check on you this afternoon, he insulted me and turned me away. When Francis attempted to stay in order to protect you, he sent him packing off like a mongrel dog. He means you harm, Will. I will never believe otherwise.”

Will drew a deep breath and sighed softly before standing. Leading her by the hand, he took her to his dressing room, telling her, “If you ever feel you need to see me, Mina, or that I am in danger and you cannot reach me, then here is a way that will not fail you.”

“What on earth?” she cut off, eyes fastening on the little panel that swung open onto the dark, spare passageway within the wall.

“Hartford House is riddled with such passages,” Will said. “I came upon them when I was studying the architect’s notes for some repairs to the load-bearing walls. They were added in a revision during the Inquisition, a means of escape from persecution at the height of the terror. All of them are still sound, though dark and close. No one uses them or knows of them, that I am aware of. Except, perhaps, Grandfather, and he has no reason to do so.”

“Can these passages connect most of the rooms?” she asked, pulling back when Will took a step towards the inky darkness within.

“The entire house, from the attic to the cellar,” Will said. “There is an identical panel in all of the dressing rooms. I admit I use them more than I probably should. It is a very convenient method to get from one place to the next without having to explain myself or engage in conversations I would prefer not to.”

“Will, can I just wiggle into the wall like a rat and come see you?” she asked, wrinkling her nose in a way that made Will smile, knowing very well she had already discounted it.

“Yes, if all else fails,” he said, squeezing her hand. “Mina, I appreciate your fear for me, but Hannibal is not the one who wishes to kill me. Whoever they are, will you please keep an open mind and be watchful for them?”

“Darling,” she said, her gaze fastened on the panel as it swung back into place, hiding the passage as if it did not even exist. “There is nothing in this world I would not do for you.”

She folded him into a warm embrace, careful to be gentle with him, and cooed softly to him as she had when they were children. The sweet scent of her skin and the familiar softness of her touch made Will smile, and he silently thanked his lucky stars that his sister was as deeply devoted to him as he was to her, in turn.

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Doors were locked and trusted guards were stationed at the entrance to Will’s suite, securing him against an all-out attack. Though Will’s aggressor seemed to prefer more subtle methods, his husband was taking no risks with his safety.

Hannibal bent his attention to the estate work that had built up without Will’s careful attendance and made moderate headway before he was interrupted by Berger bearing a missive.
The note was from Grandfather, a copy of a letter even now on its way to Mr. Stammets, detailing Mr. Dolarhyde’s history and requesting all pertinent information be forwarded to the constabulary in the Capital as a matter of record along with a request for an investigation into the matter of Will’s accidents, the accounting of which was as thorough as they could manage with such limited details.

Francis’ past military service didn’t put Hannibal any more at ease than it had Grandfather, but it did make Hannibal reassess the simmering violence that crept beneath the surface of Dolarhyde’s flat, unblinking eyes.

“Berger,” Hannibal said, lifting his eyes from the note, tracking his valet bustling about getting things set to rights. “Have you done much talking with Mr. Dolarhyde?”

“Try not to, m’Lord,” Berger said, a rare expression of true distaste on his weathered face. “He’s an odd sort. Doesn’t talk to anybody, doesn’t look at anybody, just... glowers. He’s a right nasty bit of business, m’Lord. Got that hard look about him.”

“He was a serviceeman,” Hannibal murmured, thoughtfully folding the note up and placing it on his desk. “A seaman.”

“Explains a bit about him, but in all honesty, my Lord, he gives the girls a fright and the servants are all shy of him,” Berger said, falling back into the old habit of being frank with him, as they’d been in the field. “No one is used to having an Alpha belowstairs. It ain’t natural, is it? Alphas ain’t meant to be servants, it’s against their nature.”

“Not everyone is born to circumstances which support their nature,” Hannibal said, his thoughts turning to Will and those terrible scars. The note had mentioned an accident. An accident involving Will, after which Francis had left the Graham estate for good. “Is he outside?”

“Won’t budge from the door,” Berger confirmed. “No one really knows what to do. Can’t properly order about an Alpha once their mind is set, hm?”

Hannibal’s mouth pursed in thought, recalling what Francis had said to him on the landing earlier, ‘He’s spent all his life with Alphas like you...’

He got up, ignoring Berger’s questioning look, and let himself out into the hallway where, sure enough, the two guards outside of Will’s suite were nervously flanking the stony-faced and rigid Francis Dolarhyde.

“You,” he said, abrupt, an uncharacteristic Alpha growl under the words that he couldn’t quite control. “Come with me.”

Francis stirred slightly before he stopped himself. The low, soft whisper of his voice was as agitating to Hannibal as his sulfur and brimstone scent when he said, “I swore I would protect him.”

“I appreciate your dedication, but I require answers from you, and as you are in my house, you will obey my orders,” Hannibal said, standing expectantly in his doorway. He opened the door wide and said again, “Come with me.”

Hannibal had never clashed with another Alpha in any ungentlemanly way, but he felt quite certain that it was an instance like this which prompted those deadly rows that sometimes made the papers with their violence. He had always imagined himself above that sort of nonsense.

Standing in his doorway smelling the scent of hot ashes with those pale, fierce eyes boring into him, Hannibal clearly and instinctively knew that one of these days he would be forced to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt to Mr. Dolarhyde just which of the two of them was the better Alpha.

Bristling, he deliberately followed Francis into his suite, pleased when the man’s shoulders tensed in response to giving Hannibal his back.

“Berger, go check on Will,” Hannibal said, and took a seat, indicating that Francis should stand in front of him. “It is my understanding that you are more acquainted with my spouse than I first realized.”

“Yes...” Again, that telling pause, testing and pushing despite his submissive posturing, “my Lord.”

“In what capacity did you serve the Earl of Reddig?” Hannibal asked, his eye contact direct and steady when Francis would lift his gaze.

“I was a stable hand,” Francis said. “… my Lord.”

“It amused him to put you in the role of servant, did it?” Hannibal mused, frowning.

Francis bit back a retort, took a steadying breath, and said with dull deference, “He was Master there. It was his choice.”

Hannibal tapped his fingers against his thigh, weighing how much truth he’d get out of Dolarhyde and how much would be Mina’s influence.
“What happened the day when you left?” he asked, pleased by the startled look he got in return. “Answer me, please. Something happened to my spouse and I want the truth of it.”

Francis shifted, shoulders squaring, chin tipping up as he braced. “I’ll not entertain you with talk of his pain, Lord Clarges.”

“Do I appear amused?” Hannibal asked, his voice sharpening to a snarl. “Does any part of my countenance imply that I anticipate taking pleasure in what you will tell me, Mr. Dolarhyde?”

Those glittering, cold eyes wavered and dropped, his tense posture subsiding.

“Well, then,” Hannibal said, brusque with him but unable to help it. “Out with it. I find myself in possession of facts I was ignorant of for nearly seven years and I refuse to remain ignorant a moment longer.”

After a long, considering silence, Francis softly said, “When Lady Rathmore and her brother were little, their elder sisters would play with them like dolls, dress them up to match, play like children do.”

Hannibal felt a small, hard knot of dread in his stomach, a knot that was fed by the obvious way in which Francis was disturbed merely speaking of his past.

“Lord Reddig forbid it, of course,” Francis said, his eyes catching the flicker of flames from the fireplace, glittering with anger that had long been pressed down and confined. “Whenever he ever caught them at it, he would go on a rampage.”

Francis looked to one side and said with harsh hatred, “It was Mr. Graham he always punished for it, never the girls. Even as a little one, he’d have servants hold him down and beat the dresses off his back. I can still hear it sometimes when I’m sleeping, his screaming; still see him struggling.”

The image of it was sharp and immediate, painfully forceful as if his heart had ruptured in Hannibal’s chest. He knew from the sight of those scars that Will’s childhood held terrible horrors, but the truth of it from a witness was almost more than he could bear. He swallowed hard, and said, “That must have been very difficult for you, both as a child and as an Alpha, hearing an Omega in such terrible distress.”

“Not as difficult as it was for Mr. Graham,” Francis said, anger oozing from every nuance of his posture, every crack in his whispered words. “It never stopped Lord Reddig. It never stopped any of them. He’d heal, and they’d do it again.”

“He was just a toy to them?” Hannibal said, thinking aloud, piecing together what little Will had mentioned of his sisters. “Not a brother, not a person, merely a doll to be played with at their convenience.”

“It was a game,” Francis said, the words escaping him on a hiss of disgust. “They saw the result but never the violence; it was meaningless to them, with no connection. Their father’s anger was ephemeral, never harming any one of them, and Mr. Graham never spoke of it. So they made a game of upsetting Lord Reddig. How often could they get away with it? How far could they push their father? Lady Iris went too far. She dressed them to match, two little angels in beautiful frocks, and the lot of them rode on ponies down through town in a small parade.”

Hannibal took a deep breath to control the pounding of his heart but it didn’t help. He could see Will in his mind’s eye, frightened atop his pony, terrified of being caught by his father while his sisters laughed around him, enjoying their little game. The casual cruelty of children trained to believe that one among them was lesser than they, expendable in emotion and flesh. A way to pass the time.

“I saw them riding back,” Francis said. “I tried to get to him first because he was coming, he was already moving towards them, and I just couldn’t—”

Francis paused, fury and upset shaking the whole of his impressive build from head to toe. Hannibal trembled in his chair, leaning forward to brace his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands and his stomach churning with sickened anger.

“I didn’t make it.” Francis’ voice was flat, emotionless, fearful in its intensity. “He took hold of Mr. Graham’s leg to drag him off his pony but he got hung up on the sidesaddle. There was this... this horrible sound, it... it popped. His leg, it... He didn’t even scream. He couldn’t. He just... he fell to the ground and his sisters started screaming for him. They’d never seen it for themselves. It terrified them and they all started to-to panic. Lord Reddig shouted at him, telling him to get up, and Mr. Graham tried, he just... he couldn’t stand, and... I couldn’t bear it anymore.”

Francis looked back at Hannibal, simmering with outrage, eyes blazing with challenge as if daring Hannibal to interject a single word on the subject.
“I pushed Lord Reddig out of the way and carried Mr. Graham home,” he said. “He’d dislocated his hip, pulled it completely out of place. He wasn’t even six years old at the time. Just a baby, just-just a baby...”

Hannibal swallowed against the bile that wanted to rise, his heart breaking for Will and filling with deep, swelling anger for what he’d been put through. He’d never felt so ill and wretched in his life as he did in that moment, hearing just one tale of Will’s pain from a lifetime of it, one bare glimpse into the terrible abuse that had defined his life in his father’s house.

“Lady Rathmore later told me it took a doctor in from the Capital to set it right again, but it was never whole as it was before,” Francis said, shuddering hard, hands clenching into fists at his lean thighs.

Hannibal blinked hard, mouth pressed in a thin line of pain for his mate. Struggling to maintain his composure, he whispered, “She later told you?”

“You asked about the day I left. That was the day. I couldn’t bear to stay a moment longer,” Francis said. “I couldn’t protect him. I couldn’t keep him from suffering, not then.”

There was fire in his eyes and a dangerous promise of violence in his deceptively soft voice when he said, “But now I can, Lord Clarges. I won’t make the same mistakes as I did then. I’ll protect him from whatever might hurt him, even if that’s you.”

Hannibal’s head whipped up and he surged to his feet before he realized it. Trembling with barely-suppressed rage at what he’d been told, he said with clipped, harsh anger, “You will never have any reason to protect Will from me, Mr. Dolarhyde. But despite your story, your history of violence and your unhesitating use of it makes me understandably wary of having you anywhere near my mate. That you arrive now, when he is in such peril, only makes me all the more suspicious of you.”

“I arrive now because your mate is in peril,” Francis said, his gaze unwavering. “My Lord. Mr. Graham has suffered enough in his life, first at his father’s hand and now at yours. I’ll not add to his woes. I only wish to keep him safe from harm. I will protect him.”

Hannibal took a step closer, looming into Francis’ space, watching the Alpha bristle in response.

“You are dangerous and your intentions seem cloudy at best,” Hannibal said, taut with tension, grimly staring at Francis and holding those dead, pale eyes. “Protection is a very loose term, after all, and I am not sure our definitions align. As you are here at his request and under his sufferance, I will not interfere or undermine his authority in this house, but I promise you this, Dolarhyde, if one curl on his head—one single hair—comes to any manner of harm, you will be held accountable.”

Francis stared at him, unblinking, unwavering.

“I appreciate your actions on his behalf in the past, but be sure your actions are on his behalf now,” Hannibal warned, staring him down. “I am going to find whoever has tried to harm Will. I am going to see to it that they pay, either by the law or by my own hand. I can promise you that, Francis. And I always keep my promises.”

Francis blinked, his tension thick enough to cut.

“Keep that in mind as you maintain your vigil,” Hannibal said, gesturing him towards the door, “and see to it that your loyalties lie where they will best preserve your life.”

Deeply disturbed by what he’d managed to get out of Francis, Hannibal declined to attend dinner, choosing instead to continue his work on the estate business with a decanter of brandy.

It didn’t help.

It didn’t erase or even numb what he’d been told and he found himself over and again in front of the washroom door, staring at the panel and debating intruding on Will. He grew more anxious as the hours passed, irrationally worried that someone would manage to find their way through the measures they’d taken and somehow snuff Will out like the bare flame on a candle.

Resigning himself to bed and the hope that morning would bring him some improvement in his disposition, Hannibal finally did go through to check on Will once more.

His spouse was sleeping soundly when Hannibal moved to check the locks again. The bolt was thrown, of course, but he was compelled to check anyway, and turned from the door to look at Will’s sleeping form.

He was all but lost in the bedding, his dark, curly-haired head resting on plump pillows, the purple lump on his forehead stark against his pale skin but already beginning to subside. One arm was atop the covers, his slender wrist curved, his fingers
lax. Hannibal reached out and slipped his own fingers beneath them, feeling the calluses of hard work and the strength there that was as much dogged determination as it was his nature. He slid his fingertips to Will's palm, thumb brushing over the top of his hand, and felt a pang when Will's mouth twitched in a slight smile.

Hannibal crouched next to his bed and smoothed Will's curls with his opposite hand, thoughtful and sorrowful. Everything he learned came to bear on him and he trembled with the force of it. In the quiet, moonlit darkness, he clasped Will's hand tightly, bowed his head to the mattress, and silently wept.

He wept for the child Will had been.

He wept for the boy who had come to his home with the promise of a new beginning and found only the same disregard his father had always shown him.

He wept for what Will might have been, and for what he had managed to be despite everything—stalwart, honest, good to the very core of himself in ways some people could never hope to achieve.

But in the end he wept for what might have been, the potential he'd wasted for both of them, the hope of happiness he'd rejected, and all the time they could never get back.

He almost didn't realize at first that Will was stroking his hair, fingers soft and gentle in their petting of him. He stilled beneath that touch and the soft exhale of, "Sh..." that came from his little mate.

Hannibal lifted his face, finding Will still sleeping, brow furrowed in slight distress.

"Sh..." Will sighed, his hand falling away but the fingers still trapped in Hannibal's hand squeezed him softly.

"Will," Hannibal whispered, wiping his face against the fresh tears that threatened just knowing that, even asleep, Will couldn't bear another's suffering. "How can I ever make any of it up to you?"

He couldn't. It was the simple and ugly truth.

"Will," he said again, a soft smile overcoming his sorrow when Will squeezed his fingers again, murmuring something in his sleep that Hannibal couldn't make out. He leaned closer and Will's eyes fluttered a bit, bleary and glassy. Hannibal smoothed his curls again and whispered, "I didn't mean to disturb you. I only wanted to check on you."

Will blinked slowly, as if his eyelids were too heavy to raise, partly the late hour, partly the concussion, and partly the painkiller Jimmy had given him before bed.

"If you need anything," Hannibal said, moving to stand, "please call out."

Will's fingers tightened on his unexpectedly and he sighed, "Don't..."

Hannibal's smile faded and he stood, reluctant to let go of Will's hand but knowing he had no right to stay when Will didn't want him to. "I apologize for intruding on you. Please, go back to sleep, you need your rest—"

"Don't go," Will said, rolling onto his side with Hannibal's fingers trapped against his chest. He snuggled into the pillows with another weighty sigh and relaxed.

Hannibal hesitated, and gently eased his hand out of Will's. He considered leaving. He knew he should leave, all things considered.

But part of him—a part that was growing stronger by the moment—wanted to stay, not for any nefarious purpose, but to keep him safe, to watch over him, to give him some small measure of comfort the people in his life had denied him from his earliest awareness.

So he moved to the opposite side of the bed and eased down atop the covers next to his mate's sleeping body. He moved closer cautiously, careful not to disturb Will's sleep. Hesitance made him graceless but he folded one arm over Will's side, settling against the warm curve of his body and tucking close.

Will uttered a soft, coaxing chirp in his sleep and, when Hannibal's hand came to rest against his chest, he wrapped his smaller fingers around Hannibal's and clung tight.

"Go back to sleep, Will," Hannibal murmured, curling around him as best he was able, considering he was atop the covers and Will was tucked beneath them. He nuzzled his nose into the crown of Will's head, his soft curls tickling and fragrant, and sighed softly at how good it felt, as if some part of himself he'd never known was missing had clicked into place. He blinked in the darkness, drowsy and content, and pressed a soft kiss to Will's head. "I won't let anyone hurt you again, Will, not even myself. I promise."
And Hannibal always kept his promises.

Will felt much improved the next morning, waking from a peculiar but pleasant dream of being held through the night. It felt so real that it surprised him to wake alone, though there was honestly no reason it should.

He rang for Jimmy, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and sitting up with only a twinge of the pain he’d felt the day before. He hated to admit it, but Hannibal’s methods and medications worked, even if it made him sleepy.

He just felt awake enough to brave standing when Jimmy came in, bright-eyed and chipper and smiling, as always, calling a cheerful, “Good morning, Mr. Graham!” as he snagged Will’s robe to bundle him up. “Do you need help to the washroom?”

“No, Jimmy, I think I can make it, but do you know what happened to that letter?” Will asked, troubled to see that it was no longer on the nightstand where he’d left it.

“No, Mr. Graham, last I saw it was when I handed it to you,” Jimmy said, concern wrinkling his brow. “I doubt any of the maids took it, but I’ll ask all the same.”

“Thank you, that would be very kind,” Will said, making a mental note to write Mr. Brauner as soon as he could, just in case some well-meaning someone had put it to post.

“We’ll check for it when we clean, of course,” Jimmy called, watching him hawkishly as he made his cautious way to the washroom. “Will you be going down to breakfast?”

“No, thank you, I’ll have a tray,” Will told him, preferring that to facing conversation at the breakfast table he simply wasn’t up for.

Much to his surprise, when he emerged from relieving himself of his excess tea, Jimmy informed him that Hannibal would like to join him at his small breakfast.

Will agreed before he realized it, and in the few moments it took to relay his assent, Jimmy set him up at a small table near the window in the dappled morning light, comfortable and snug in his robe.

Hannibal knocked, coming in when Will called entry. He stopped just inside the door and smiled, a slight curve of his lips that caused Will to look away hastily. It made him acutely recall the comfort of his dream last night, the warm closeness that had allowed him to sleep without nightmares to plague him. He wondered if perhaps Hannibal hadn’t come in late last night to dose him and it had somehow translated to his dreams. Or perhaps his imagination—or the painkilling powder—was playing tricks on him altogether.

“You look much improved this morning,” Hannibal said, moving to take the seat opposite Will. “Is the light too bright?”

“No, thank you, it’s perfect,” Will said, reaching for the teapot.

Hannibal reached as he did, both of them at once, the slight brush of his fingers over the back of Will’s hand unexpectedly pleasant. “Please, allow me.”

Will withdrew, blinking against the after effects of the medicine. Hannibal poured them both a steaming cup and turned Will’s handle around to towards him.

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Hannibal reached as he did, both of them at once, the slight brush of his fingers over the back of Will’s hand unexpectedly pleasant. “Please, allow me.”

Will withdrew, blinking against the after effects of the medicine. Hannibal poured them both a steaming cup and turned Will’s handle around to towards him.

“There we are. I thought we might try a small outing today and test how you’re feeling,” Hannibal said, not quite able to hide that he was assessing Will for signs of strain.

“To where?” Will asked, stirring his porridge without appetite.

“Down to the stables, perhaps? Or to your office,” Hannibal said, content to simply sit opposite Will and sip tea all day, if all else failed. “I don’t want you to overexert yourself, but some light exercise can often do more good for you than anything.”

“The stables,” Will said. “There is something there I need to check on and I’m not sure I could make it all the way to my office. How did the work go last night?”

“Slowly,” Hannibal said. “I haven’t your affinity for it, but I managed. Regrettfully, I missed supper. I do hate abandoning my defenseless old grandfather to your sister’s hands.”

“Hannibal,” Will said, keenly disapproving.

“That glower was nearly up to snuff,” Hannibal said, Will’s scolding something he relished.

“My sister is a lovely young lady,” Will told him. “And your grandfather is hardly defenseless. I certainly hope Mina was on her toes last night.”
“He has an uncanny habit of keeping people dancing to his tune, so I imagine so,” Hannibal said. “Are we settled then? Breakfast, then a walk to the stable.”

“Yes,” Will said, unable to resist smiling. It faded some, uncertain at the edges, and his voice was quiet with concern when he asked, “Why are you being so kind to me recently, Hannibal?”

Hannibal gazed at him for a long moment, and then turned his head to look out the window, his profile severe and beautiful, so like that statue Will had first compared him to.

Yet this stone did not seem so cold as it had before, nor so immovable.

It seemed... reachable.

“The instant I first laid eyes on you, Will, I saw everything that was good about the country I had left behind, a breath of fresh air after the scourge of war. I saw beauty and youth and innocence and the potential for happiness,” Hannibal said, and forced himself to look back at Will, to acknowledge what he had done and accept the judgment that would weigh in Will’s sorrowful blue eyes. “A heartbeat later, I caught the scent of your skin, warmth and sweetness calling out like a siren song, a lure no Alpha could resist.”

Will swallowed hard, and managed, “You resisted.”

“Yes, I did,” Hannibal said, mouth tightening. “But at what cost, Will? Everything you showed me in your attempts to appease my unjustified treatment of you, I saw as something else entirely and threw back into your face. I confused you, child that you were. I twisted every honest effort of yours into motivations not your own and turned them back on you with a sharpened edge meant to wound.”

Will dropped his eyes to his porridge bowl, his chest aching to be reminded of the few short, awful days of their first acquaintance.

“There are a great many things I would change if I could, Will,” Hannibal said, the soft rumble of his voice purring pleasantly through Will’s chest. Despite himself, the young Omega responded to him, to his scent, the gentle tone of his voice—all those things his nature craved that he firmly rejected.

“You’re an Alpha,” Will said, his voice barely above a whisper. “When you change your mind, you change people’s lives. It isn’t something you should do lightly.”

“No, nor do I,” Hannibal agreed. “But I do think of what might have been had I done things differently.”

“Then you are a fool, Lord Clarges,” Will said, the sad surety of the words conveying how often Will had said those same words to himself.

Hannibal considered that statement in all of its resigned, unspoken pain, and drew another soft breath, tasting Will’s faint scent on his tongue.

“I have caused you quite enough pain, Will,” Hannibal said, and Will’s eyes shot up to his, surprised and sparkling. “I have been needlessly cruel to you, wasted years of your youth I can never return, abandoned you to the gossip and opinions of people not fit to lick your boots, and I am sorry for it. To the very core of myself, I am sorry for it.”

Will flinched when those words hit him, a physical ache in his heart that felt as if it might stop altogether.

“I am not being kind to you, Will, or even giving you your due,” Hannibal said, distressed by his distress. “I am merely treating you with the respect and courtesy you deserve.”

Will swallowed hard. “As an Omega?”

“As a human,” Hannibal said, immediate and firm. “I have lived my life with the singular goal of never apologizing for myself or my actions. After Melinda, I swore I would never regret anything ever again. But you... you, I do regret. I regret how I have treated you. I regret what I have done to you. I regret the part I played in taking an aspect of yourself away from you and crushing it so thoroughly it might never recover.”

“And what aspect was that?” Will asked, unable to look at him for fear Hannibal would see for himself how deeply his confession was affecting him.

“There was a heart in that youth I tried to destroy,” Hannibal said. “It has had more hardship than any heart should ever have to bear.”

Will took a shallow, shuddering breath, and whispered, “It isn’t your responsibility to tend it, Lord Clarges.”
“It is my responsibility, but not my right,” Hannibal told him, his hand trembling slightly when he fiddled with his cup. He looked out of the window again, blinking hard and trying to regain control of himself, but his voice was unsteady when he softly added, “I would mend it if I could.”

Will laughed at that, a short scoffing sound. “There are things which cannot be mended, Hannibal. There is no moving backwards and time does not reverse. Teacups remain shattered, words remain spoken, and everyone lives with the consequences as they must.”

“You are made of stronger stuff than a teacup, Will,” Hannibal said, earning a soft, indrawn breath from his mate. “With a kind of strength that bows in the face of adversity like a willow tree in the midst of a storm, bending without breaking and rising up stronger than the force which tried to change you.”

Will met his gaze, his eyes sheened with unshed tears. When he saw the mirroring gleam of tears in Hannibal’s own eyes, he clenched his teeth to resist weeping right then and there, for he had never dreamed—even with his vast imagination—that Hannibal Lecter would ever show him such a thing.

“I will never forgive myself, Will, for ever making you question why I am being kind to you,” Hannibal whispered, and reached across the small table for Will’s lax hand, slowly enough to give away his intention and allow Will to reject it.

He didn’t. He held still and let Hannibal’s warm fingers brush over his hand and curl against his palm in a light squeeze. He blinked, dropping a few traitorous tears, and quickly brushed at them with his free hand.

“I apologize, I am not as well as I imagined—”

Hannibal shifted and wiped the tears away with his opposite hand, still holding tightly to Will.

“It has been a very trying few days,” Hannibal said. “You have more right than anyone to a tear or two, Will. Gods know we all have our fair share at times... I wish I could wipe away the cause as easily.”

Will struggled with himself, trying to parse out just what he was feeling and why. With Hannibal’s gentle fingers on his face, he met his husband’s gaze and whispered, “You hurt me.”

Hannibal flinched, the shimmer in his eyes spilling over, but he never blinked, never turned away from the accusation; he didn’t even react to the tears trailing down his cheeks, as if they were right and proper, justified somehow in ways that Will could not allow himself to feel.

“I did,” Hannibal said, his low voice softly breaking with emotion. “And I have to live with what I’ve cost you, and so many others, Will. I hurt you, and I can only beg your forgiveness, though I do not expect or deserve it. I wish I could take it back.”

“Would you strive to bring it together again, Hannibal?” Will asked, recalling his nightmare and how desperately he had tried to heal what had been broken.

“I can only try with everything in me,” Hannibal told him. “And if it takes the rest of my life, I will never stop trying, Will.”

Will drew a soft, unsteady breath and closed his eyes as he tried to control the shaken, aching vulnerability that Hannibal had awoken with his heartfelt words. He felt silly and stupid for having let those tears escape, but the longer Hannibal soothed them away, the less awful he felt for showing a weakness his father had always despised, a weakness Hannibal had no qualms in showing. His bond to to his husband hummed with the resonance of his feelings and his honesty in what he had said. He truly, in this moment, genuinely offered Will his regret, and the understanding of it nearly jostled loose another spill of tears.

Hannibal just kept gently brushing his fingers over Will’s cheeks, long after the trails of his tears had dried to silvery salt on his pale skin. The touch was tender and attentive, soothing, and helped him to calm his anxiety somewhat.

“Shall we make ourselves presentable and take our walk?” Hannibal asked after a long, comforting silence. He turned his hand against Will’s cheek and cupped his face, brushing his thumb beneath one weary blue eye and offering Will a soft smile when their gazes met.

Will hesitated, torn between wanting to retreat to his bed to rediscover his embarrassment and wanting to enjoy the ceasefire for a while. Before he could answer either way, a knock came on the door and Jimmy let himself in, agitated and flushed.

“Jimmy?” Will asked, his fingers clenching on Hannibal’s in reaction to his valet’s distress. Hannibal immediately dropped his hand, fingers trailing beneath Will’s chin in a soft caress as he did so.

“Lord Clarges,” Jimmy said, holding out a sheet of paper as he approached them. “I thought the two of you needed to see this immediately.”
Hannibal gave Will’s fingers a soft squeeze and let go of his hand to take the paper. Will wiped at his face, composing himself, grateful for the interruption for giving him a chance to feel less exposed.

“It was tacked to the doorway,” Jimmy said, wringing his hands. “No one saw anyone about! His Grace has men on it now, my Lords, but there is so precious little to go on.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, handing over the paper with steady, somber seriousness. “I think we will be leaving immediately.”

Will turned the paper over, a simple double-creased letter without a seal.

*Next time you won’t be so lucky, Mr. Graham. You’ll never be safe again.*

Will paled, but anger bubbled up in him just seeing it. It took him a moment to realize not all of his upset was solely his own—Hannibal was quietly furious, mouth pursed with anger, clenching and unclenching his hand into a fist as if imagining himself engaging this nameless enemy.

“Jimmy,” Will said, gingerly gaining his feet and going to his jewelry box. He opened it and pried up the lining to fish the other letter out and handed both of them to his valet. “Run this down to His Grace, per his request, and then inform Mr. Hawkes that Hannibal and I will need our trunks.”

He looked back at Hannibal, who was watching him with something that bled through his bond as fear—fear for him, fear for his life, for his loss.

“Light or heavy?” Jimmy asked, perking up considerably at the prospect of escape.

Squaring his shoulders, Will firmly said, “Heavy, Jimmy. We’re leaving Hartford House.”

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**Chapter 23**

In the wake of the threats against Will’s life—his cut girth strap, the menacing shadow that had pushed him down the stairs, and the note that had promised he would never be safe again—Will Lecter Graham decided they would leave Hartford House.

Jimmy and Berger were directly on top of things and immediate, controlled chaos ensued.

Will soaked in a hot bath drawn by his husband, doors shut against the noise. He had a requisite pot of tea on the little table next to him at Hannibal’s insistence, and after the emotional drain of the morning, he didn’t put up a fuss over it.

Part of him wanted to. Part of him wanted to reject any comfort his husband offered, to drape himself in the cold steel of judgment urging him to withhold his forgiveness, to rebuff Hannibal’s advances, to resist the temptation of acceptance because it would only lead him to future pain.

It was his father’s instruction at play, he knew, coaxing forth a resentful kernel of mistrust and doubt.

The other part of him was still as deeply immersed in Hannibal’s words as his sore shoulders were in hot water.

*I wish I could take it back…*

It pulled against his father’s teachings with relentless, shocking force, turning ‘what if’ into potential rather than regret.

The future had always looked so bleak to Will, brief, unkind, and uncertain. He had lived for years on the cusp of leaving, never daring to put down roots in Hartford, never having more belongings than could be packed into his measly trunks and carted off on the inevitable day Hannibal returned to oust him, no matter the ownership of Hartford House.

It didn’t seem so dismal a future to him now after the last few hours, not entirely. If Hannibal Lecter could admit to regret, could shed tears for Will’s sake, then perhaps even the dark clouds hanging overhead could be parted by a shaft of sunlight. It was enough to let Will draw a breath of hope untainted even by the threat of a would-be murderer still at large.

The future was still bleak and uncertain, but there was a possibility for something brighter, and that gave him more hope than he’d felt in a very long time.

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Hannibal, dressed and chafing to leave, kept an eye on the proceedings. He knew his presence unnerved the lower staff, but he hoped to hurry things along all the same. He felt a deep and driving need to take Will away from here, whatever the cost, to take him out of harm’s way and keep him safe.

“Make sure my medical bag is kept out with my travel case, Berger, in case Will has need of it,” Hannibal said.
“Of course, m’Lord,” Berger told him, and tapped a stack of correspondence he’d just brought in. “Post’s come, looks like some things from your office.”

“Thank you, Berger,” Hannibal said, shuffling through them and deeming most of them nonsense. Invitations for off-Season events, personal letters from patients needing one thing or another, the occasional balance sheet from various suppliers he used for his medical equipment.

The last one, however, made him set the others aside immediately and tear it open with nervous anxiety.

My Dear Lord Clarges:

I am writing from the Continent in the hopes this letter arrives in time to warn you—we lost track of Mr. Verger in the northern reaches of Netze on the third of this month and have been unable to locate his trail from that date to this. We will, naturally, continue to hunt for any sign of where he has gone, but it is our fear that he has moved further north to port and we are headed there in the hopes of intercepting him before he boards a vessel, or at least to discover if he has taken to sea. Please use this information to protect those in your care.

Ever your faithful servant,

Randall Tier

Grim and unhappy, Hannibal said, “Verger has returned.”

“M’Lord?”

“Mr. Tier has sent a letter, it has been over two months now since it was posted, thanks to it chasing me all over the Gods blessed country,” Hannibal swore, careful in his anger not to damage the letter he still held. “He could be anywhere.”

Berger blinked, taken aback by the information.

“The moment we’re clear, Berger, I want you to ride straight for Galley Field,” Hannibal told him, stuffing the other letters and invitations into his valise for the ride. “He has no means of knowing where they are, but I would feel safer all the same if you gave the Misses some warning that his whereabouts are a mystery.”

“Of course, m’Lord!” Berger said, returning to packing with greater haste. “Gods above as if we don’t have worries and woes enough to suit us, that he’s got to come slithering back around, the snake!”

“It certainly gives me cause to reassess my assumption he had no hand in Will’s accidents,” Hannibal said, jotting a note on the top of the letter. “I’m sending this down to Grandfather. Retrieve it before we leave and take it on to Galley Field. And remind them again that they are to open any correspondence from Tier as it comes! I would feel very relieved on that count, as I am sure Mr. Tier has sent several letters to the estate to ensure this information reached me.”

“I will m’Lord, we’ll manage between us,” Berger promised. “You worry about his Lordship, I’ll worry about the Misses.”

“We’ll both worry about all of them, Berger, let’s don’t kid ourselves, and I want you to come straight from Galley Field to our destination after,” Hannibal said. “You’ll probably be there waiting for us; I have no intentions of pushing things in the state Will’s in.”

“Let his Lordship enjoy the journey, m’Lord,” Berger said, smiling at him. “Price says he’s never left the area since he’s come here. He’s due a pleasant day or two, ain’t he?”

“All of them, if I have any say in it,” Hannibal said, and gestured towards the washroom door, adding, “Don’t let anyone in that room.”

“On my life, m’Lord!”

“Mrs. Henderson,” Hannibal said, striding out into the hallway where the dainty housekeeper was helping Mr. Hawkes to orchestrate their sudden move.

“My Lord?”

“Take this down to Grandfather, please, it’s urgent,” Hannibal said, and she immediately did so, clutching the letter as if someone might take it from her.

Hannibal turned to Mr. Hawkes and said to him, “Send word down to have Will’s fishing gear packed, along with anything he usually takes with him when he goes.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Hawkes said, beaming at him and giving quick, whispered instructions to one of the departing footmen.
Hannibal saw several maids go trotting past to help Jimmy, and he followed them into Will’s suite to check on the progress there.

“Will we be ready, say, within the hour?” Hannibal asked.

“I most certainly will be,” Jimmy said, deftly instructing the girls filling Will’s two aged, worn trunks with his meager funeral clothing. “He has so little, even still. I’ll be so relieved to get the rest of his wardrobe in, but he will need more trunks, my Lord.”

“You have my permission to purchase them on his behalf, if he has no interest in doing so,” Hannibal said, watching one of the girls move to Will’s vanity to pack his various items. He moved closer, spying the vials he’d seen previously. Curious, he asked, “Jimmy, what are those? Are they medications of some sort?”

“Uhm, no, my Lord, those are Omegan things,” Jimmy said, his tone repressive enough to keep Hannibal from asking further, though his curiosity remained unsatisfied. “Mr. Graham has the constitution of an ox. He’s never had need of a doctor since he’s come here.”

“And this?” Hannibal asked, touching a plain brown box pushed against the mirror.

Jimmy came and opened it for him to show him the contents and Hannibal froze. The teacup Will had shattered lay inside on a bed of paper, the tiniest shards of it placed within the larger pieces, rescued carefully from the scene of its demise.

“He was so fond of that tea set,” Jimmy sighed. “I didn’t have the heart to tell him there was no reason to keep it. Something broken this badly... well, there’s just no making it right again.”

“What of the rest of the set to which it belongs?” Hannibal asked, ignoring the flurry of activity around them. In his mind’s eye Will flung it the teacup to the floor over and over, trembling and hurt and deeply, justly offended.

“Oh, there’s only another cup and the teapot left, Lord Clarges. All the other pieces have been broken and such. It was quite old and should have been gotten rid of a long time ago,” Jimmy said, shooing the maid away to pack Will’s Omegan things himself. “Mr. Graham saved it from the rubbish pile when he first arrived. It was just for his private use.”

“He saved it,” Hannibal whispered, struck by something he could not name, but it pulsed and pounded within him like a heartbeat.

“He’s had so little,” Jimmy said, carefully ensuring each glass vial was upright and well-padded, not nearly as oblivious to Hannibal’s reaction as he seemed to be. “He’s very sentimental, my Lord.”

Two delicate, aged teacups with their teapot. One cup for Will, and the other for a guest who never arrived to share time with him.

‘Tell it to gather itself up. Go on. Tell it to do its duty now, Hannibal, in the state it is in.’

Hannibal closed the box back up and carried it with him out into the hall, Will’s voice echoing in his memory.

“Mr. Hawkes,” he said, catching the old butler before he went downstairs to hurry the footmen. He held the box out to him, noting that Hawkes immediately recognized it. “I want you to have this repacked securely and sent to the Capital.”

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“Of course, my Lord,” Hawkes said, taking the box with great dignity. “To Gideon and Garnets, my Lord?”

“The very place,” Hannibal said, unable to resist adding, “Be very careful with it.”

“We will be, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes assured him. “Shall I send instructions?”

“Yes, ask on my behalf if there is anything to be done for it,” Hannibal said. “And say I will be in to discuss it with Mr. Gideon as soon as my schedule allows.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, and immediately moved to make it happen.

Hannibal watched the box start its journey, bearing the shattered cup within.

No, he could not tell it to be whole again, he knew that now.

He could, however, do everything in his power to repair the damage that had been done, just as he’d promised to his spouse. It wasn’t his right to mend it; he’d forfeited that right nearly seven years ago, but he would mend it all the same. It was his responsibility and his deepest desire to do so.

He would see that cup made whole again, and settled safely back in Will’s keeping where it belonged.

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Two coaches were ready and waiting by the time the trunks were brought downstairs and loaded under Mr. Hawkes' watchful gaze. There was clamor enough to wake the dead, but Will's sister seemed determined to sleep through it.

Francis, however, watched everything with glowering, close attendance, as if he might discern their destination from the method used to load their luggage. Hannibal caught him twice sharply questioning the coachmen only to be turned away unhappy—no one knew of their intended retreat, even the men who would take them there, not until the moment the horses began to move and Hannibal would give the order.

Hannibal lingered at the front door a moment longer to watch Francis skulk away. When he heard the soft thump of doors and footsteps on the runners, he turned to look at the stairwell with anticipation. Will came into view at the top of the landing with Jimmy clucking like a mother hen, anxiously admonishing him to use the railing and be careful.

Hannibal moved to the foot of the stairs, smiling to himself at the sight of his spouse coming towards him with his usual pensive frown and stern expression, so incongruous on his smooth face. It struck him again how young Will was, and how much he'd lived through to this point, so much of which could have been prevented or avoided. He was strong, just as Hannibal had said, but underneath Will's reserve was a man in the prime of his youth who deserved to enjoy himself, and Hannibal was determined that he would.

Will glanced up as he neared the last few risers and asked with a quizzical half-smile, “What are you staring at, Lord Clarges?”

“Nothing,” Hannibal said, holding out his hand in case Will needed it. “I was merely enjoying the sight of you.”

Will snorted, feeling well enough to summon a scoffing laugh.

“No, honestly, I was,” Hannibal said, chuckling when Will batted his hand away. “You look—and you certainly act—as if you’re feeling much better.”

“I am, thank you,” Will said, waiting for embarrassment to rise over his tears, yet it never came. He felt unshackled ever so slightly, a prisoner given a draft of fresh, clean air. It was as if even so small a release of pressure, so small a show of the depth of pain Hannibal had caused him had eased things within him. He’d given Hannibal a ripe opportunity to insult him, to belittle him, to be the very monster his father had always been and he always expected to get.

But he hadn’t.

Instead, he’d gotten an apology, a genuine expression of regret and a chance to give or withhold his forgiveness with no pressure to respond in haste. Hannibal had reached out, overcoming his natural repulsion towards Omegas. He’d reached out and accepted Will’s pain, shared it, even, if Will could trust the truth of his bond to his husband and the tears he had shed. It cast a new light on Hannibal that showed a side of him Will had seen too little of to easily recognize, but he felt himself wanting to see more.

“We must go see Grandfather before we depart,” Will insisted, flinching from the growing daylight coming in through the open door.

“I was about to suggest the same thing, but it seems he’s come to check on us,” Hannibal said, turning Will to face the opposite direction with him. “Good morning, Grandfather.”

“Good morning to you both,” Roland said, looking rather fragile for a restless night’s sleep. “I wanted to be sure to tell you, Hannibal, that Zeller will be checking into that issue you apprised me of, and I’ve given the notice back to your man.”

“Issue?” Will asked, curious and feeling just a glimmer of dread.

“I received information from my man overseas that Mason Verger has slipped his watch,” Hannibal said, causing Will to frown with confusion.

“Why on earth do you keep tabs on Mason Verger?” he asked.

“It’s rather complicated,” Hannibal admitted. “I’ll be happy to tell you, but there are certain issues I need to settle before you hear the whole of it.”

Will cocked a look at him that Hannibal had the eerie understanding would soon compel him to do a great many things he never imagined he would do as an adult, starting with instantly spill his secrets to his Omega husband. But he shored up and Will transferred his gaze to Grandfather when the old Alpha said, “Now, now, children, it will all come out in the wash! And pray don’t look at me that way, my dear! I couldn’t tell you myself, as my grandson is determined to be a mystery to me!”
“Grandfather!” Hannibal said, but was overridden by Roland saying, “I am in no mood for excuses, Hannibal! I merely wished to check on you before you leave and make sure you’ve told no one of your destination.”

“Destination? Will?” Mina called, coming lightly down the stairs with her skirts expertly drawn up in one hand and the other skimming the banister, barely making contact. She moved with the same fluidity as her brother, though lacked the decisiveness which gave Will his signature grace. She held out her hand in expectation of assistance and Hannibal moved to take it from habit, guiding her down the last few steps and escorting her to her brother’s side where she looked from one face to the next, utterly, innocently bewildered. “What is going on? Why are there coaches out? Has someone arrived? Are we to have a party?”

“No, young lady, Hannibal is taking Will on a short trip,” Grandfather said, giving her little room to argue.

“I apologize, Mina,” Will said when Hannibal released her hand and moved to his side, a somber and protective presence. “This is very short notice, but I received a threat in the form of a note this morning and we all feel it would be best if I leave Hartford House.”

“Leave?” she asked, as though the meaning of the word escaped her. She groped her hand out and Francis appeared, summoned as if from thin air. He took the hand she offered, silent and watchful—a fighting dog leashed, but barely.

“Yes, Lady Rathmore,” Hannibal said, wrinkling his nose against Dolarhyde’s Alpha scent. “Just until matters are sorted.”

“But what shall I do?” she asked, faint accusation in her voice. “I have come to visit you, Will.”

“I know, Mina, I—”

“All the way out here in the country,” she said, emphasizing her point.

“Yes, Mina, and—”

“When I could be in the Capital,” she added, blinking rapidly, wounded to the core.

“I am so sorry, Mina,” Will said, taking a deep breath, not missing Grandfather’s disapproving look at his sister. “I realize I invited you here and greatly inconvenienced you, and I am grateful you came. Considering the circumstances—”

“You will, of course, remain here at your brother’s invitation and play hostess for Grandfather in our absence, Lady Rathmore,” Hannibal cut in, smiling at her consternation. “Please say you will.”

Doubt clouded her face, quickly replaced by a pleased, cat-like smile.

“Of course, Hannibal dear,” she said, smiling expansively at him, then at Will, and finally turning it on Roland himself. “I would love nothing more than to take Will’s place!”

“In his absence, of course,” Hannibal clarified, feeling Will stiffen next to him. Mina’s smile never changed, but she said, “Of course. And where will the two of you be off to, hm?”

“I am afraid we are playing a bit of intrigue with that, Mina,” Roland said, curtailing any attempts to find out. “You will help me with that, my dear, won’t you? When people come calling?”

“Yes, Your Grace!” Mina said, wrenching her hand free of Dolarhyde’s to press it to her heart, a faint flush on her cheeks. “Goodness! That you think you must ask! I am entirely at your disposal!”

Will frowned softly, disturbed by how agitated she seemed. Francis, too, seemed disturbed, and stirred as if he would touch her, then abruptly changed his mind.

“Francis, you must take excellent care of my brother,” she said, rounding on the Alpha next to her to level a stern look at him.

“We would not wish to separate you from your loyal servant,” Hannibal said, moving closer to Will when Dolarhyde’s eyes fastened on his oblivious mate.

“Will,” Mina said, gazing at her twin as if he’d betrayed her. “You will be taking Francis, surely? He insisted he must come to be with you during these troubling times and I have made arrangements to spare him.”

“Mina, I would never wish to refuse—”

“You cannot refuse,” she insisted, smiling and satisfied that she had her way. “Lord Clarges, you of course wish only for the safety and happiness of my dear brother, do you not? Why, how could you possibly neglect to bring along someone as stalwart and dedicated as our own dear Francis?”

“Considering he is your Francis, Lady Rathmore,” Hannibal said, increasingly less pleased with the situation, “I would never dream of removing him from your care.”
“Nonsense, I insist!” Mina said, beaming at Hannibal. “And we are all settled! Honestly, all this secrecy! Very cloak and dagger, isn’t it, Francis? Hm?”

“I am very glad you’ve decided to accept Mr. Dolarhyde’s assistance, Hannibal,” Will said, and to Francis he added, “I hope you know how grateful I am for your presence and for your dedication in protecting me. I will take all the help that is offered, and gladly, with every confidence that you will act in our best interests.”

Francis ducked his head, blushing from the praise and as meek as Hannibal had ever seen him. It made his lip curl with dislike but he tried to hide it for Will’s sake.

“I will do anything you need me to, Mr. Graham,” Francis whispered, and Mina uttered one of her trilling, false laughs that put the entirety of the Hartford House glassware at risk of shattering.

“Silly! Francis does as he’s told, don’t you, Francis?” she asked, patting his bowed head as if he was some great, dangerous hound at her side. “Run along, now, and stop skulking, you horrid thing.”

“Mina, that is uncalled for!” Will said, the sharpest rebuke he could manage against his twin. “Francis, please go pack your things and assist the staff with the luggage. Jimmy will instruct you on how best you may be of service to me.”

“Well done,” Hannibal said, leaning close to murmur it in Will’s ear. Much to his relief, Francis went downstairs and took that brimstone tang of scent with him.

“I am surprised you’re allowing him to come along,” Will said, unsettled and flinching at the dull threat of pain that began to creep from the base of his skull.

“It is for the best, my dear,” Roland said, exchanging a telling look with Hannibal. “The two of you must be on your way! Daylight is wasting as we speak!”

“Ah! Yes, indeed! Allow me a moment to say goodbye to my brother, Your Grace,” Mina said, reaching to take Will’s hand and pull him to one side.

Will took her arm and walked her a short distance away, unsurprised when she leaned in close and hissed, “Tell me where you are going right this minute, Will.”

“Mina, no one knows where we are going,” Will said, adding, “Myself included!”

“So,” she said, taking a long pause to assess him, cold judgment in her eyes. “You will just vanish to an unknown place in the presence of a man who likely wants to murder you? Hm? How smart is that, dearest?”

“Mina, I am not vanishing anywhere, and Francis will be with me at your insistence! Though I will have to speak to him firmly about his doubts concerning Hannibal. As for you, I will say this only once more,” Will said, wincing as his headache worsened. “Hannibal did not try to kill me! There is someone, it is true, and we are leaving in all haste to avoid them, but it was not Hannibal!”

She stared at him, her fury showing only in her flashing blue eyes.

“You keep telling yourself that, darling,” she said, and patted his cheek with her cold hand. “Right up until he puts his hands on you as if to hold you…” she trailed her fingers down his jaw and wrapped them around his throat with slight, telling pressure, “and squeezes the life from you…”

Will stepped back from her, shaken and angry.

“You’re lucky Francis is vigilant for your sake. Your husband is a dangerous man, Will,” she said, satisfied that she had his attention. “A wolf in a gentleman’s clothing. You would be wise to flee, but only in whichever direction Lord Clarges is not currently headed.”

She smiled then, a soft and enchanting smile that did nothing to warm him from the coldness of her words.

“If you find yourself frightened, Will, trust to Francis, darling, hm?” she urged, and patted his face again. “He cannot bear to see you suffer.”

Trembling slightly and almost nauseous, Will turned his back on her, softly saying as he did so, “Goodbye, Mina.”

With an efficiency that was the hallmark of a well-organized household, the Lords Clarges were set on the road in the ducal coach with their luggage and servants in a second one just behind, forced to follow closely as only the head coachman knew where they were going.
Mr. Berger set out alone on horseback ahead of them, which Will found incredibly odd and was too curious to hold his tongue.

“I am surprised to see Mr. Berger leaving on his own,” Will said, venturing only enough to invite Hannibal’s confidence in him and hoping his husband would sate his curiosity.

“The news that Mason Verger has returned is of vital interest to those in my acquaintance,” Hannibal said, wincing as the coach hit a rut and jostled them both. “I dispatched him to ensure that no one is caught unprepared.”

“I don’t suppose now is the time to tell me,” Will guessed, annoyed to have more questions now and no answers to satisfy him. “Does Mr. Berger know where to find us?”

“Yes, he does,” Hannibal told him. “He is one of the few I trust without question. My life has, quite literally, been in his hands on numerous occasions overseas and he has proven his mettle.”

“I didn’t realize he was with you on the front,” Will said, finding it difficult to imagine Hannibal’s good-natured, weathered valet in such a dangerous situation.

“He was, indeed,” Hannibal said. “His family used to lease land on Hartford but Berger couldn’t manage alone. Grandfather was worried for my state of mind when I left in the wake of Melinda’s death. He sent Berger to keep an eye on me and he’s stuck like a burr ever since. I had to take him on as my valet to allow for his accompanying me into the military.”

“He didn’t protest?” Will asked, curious.

“No, he takes his duty very seriously. I believe if there is anyone on this earth a match for you in tenacity, Will, it might be old Berger,” Hannibal said, laughing when Will smiled. “Whether its polishing boots or firing a weapon, he has never once balked over anything I’ve gotten him into. It’s been so long, he’s nearly a proper valet by now, and gods know I would’ve died in my sleep several times over if not for his waking me.”

“I never would have guessed, though Jimmy mentioned he wasn’t a typical valet,” Will said, a little breathless with the rocking of the coach, even well-sprung as it was. They hit a particularly deep rut, wringing a pained groan out of him, and he peevishly said, “You would think Their Majesties could afford the upkeep on their roads with the taxes they receive! It is shameful that our little country lanes outdo theirs in both maintenance and convenience!”

Hannibal quirked a brow at him, surprised by his statement, the shadow of a smile playing about his lips when Will grudgingly admitted, “I regret my hasty decision to leave this morning. I had no idea it would be this particularly torturous.”

The coach hit another rut, jostling Will on the padded bench, and he braced, tensing.

Hannibal shifted in his seat across from Will and reached over to start taking the pillows Jimmy had stuffed into the coach for this very purpose.

“Will,” he said, mounding them in the seat next to him to form a little nest of cushions. “Come here, please.”

Will wearily eyed the offering, weighing his options.

“You refused the painkiller,” Hannibal reminded him. “We are once again faced with limited options.”

He saw Will frown slightly, and added, “If you move next to me, I can put my feet up.”

It was enough of an excuse for Will. He cautiously slid out of his seat and Hannibal grasped his hands, pulling him down next to him before another rut could send his head against the coach roof.

“Thank you,” Will said, dropping into the seat with a shaky sigh.

“Better?” Hannibal asked, feeling his forehead and noting the heat of his skin, the light sheen of sweat there beneath his palm, damp and hot.

“I feel like the last candy in Mrs. Pimm’s jar,” Will said, closing his eyes at the pressure of Hannibal’s cool hand against his heated forehead, “when Zeller starts rattling it about.”

“You’re very pale,” Hannibal said, and loosened Will’s neckerchief for him despite his faint protests. “Mrs. Pimms has packed us a hamper and an extra jug of tea, cold, I am sorry to say, but certainly wet. If we need to stop—”

“No, this is better,” Will said, swallowing hard, his exposed throat rippling. “I just... I need to close my eyes.”

“When we do stop, I’m insisting you take the painkiller, however much it dulls your senses,” Hannibal said, concerned for him.

“I felt I needed my wits about me,” Will said, sighing heavily. “One must never be unprepared when dealing with my sister, Lord Clarges. Especially when one must lie.”
“You didn’t lie,” Hannibal reminded him, annoyed. “You obfuscated.”

Will’s brow quirked up but he didn’t open his eyes.

“Be as sour as you please about it, as if I could sway you one way or the other, you stubborn mule,” Hannibal said, chuckling. “The fact of the matter is, no one should know where we are headed.”

“She came to visit me, Hannibal,” Will said. “I invited her to stay. The least we could have done was to include her.”

“Will, I know putting my foot down in your presence risks my losing it—”

“My presence or your foot?” Will asked, one eye opening to fix him with a pointed, amused look.

“Either,” Hannibal said, thoroughly delighted with his quip. “Potentially both. That said, we cannot swan about with your sister tagging along. It is bad enough to be dragging that surly brute of hers. We are only just getting to know one another. If we must flee from your murderer, I would prefer to do it without her influence.”

“You prefer me to be under your influence alone?” Will asked, blinking against the strengthening sun.

“Not at all, merely in my company,” Hannibal said. “It would be difficult with a third party involved.”

Will nodded, a faint gesture accompanying a frown.

“And Grandfather will be very glad to have her in our absence,” Hannibal said. “With Aunt Margaret, Aunt Grace, and Uncle Robert installed at Fernhill, and with the entertainment of the Garden Party behind us, she may accept callers on our behalf and make our excuses. I could almost thank her.”

“Why do you dislike her so?” Will asked, and chuckled at the cagey look he got in response. “You are a difficult man in many respects, Hannibal, but in that you are transparent. What is it about her that you took such immediate affront to her?”

“I resent that she wears your face and smiles with your mouth and is the very definition of the things I truly despise about spoiled, vapid, selfish creatures,” Hannibal said without hesitation.

“Had things gone differently, she would have been your wife,” Will gently said, watching him to gauge his reaction.

“I would have left the country immediately,” Hannibal snorted, wrinkling his nose. “War would be preferable, and I speak from experience.”

“Shame on you, Lord Clarges! You hardly know anything of her,” Will said, head lolling a little on the cushions, a wince stealing his smile when they hit another bad patch of road leaving the county. “Yet you speak so ill of my sister.”

“I would prefer not to speak of her at all,” Hannibal informed him, winning a tired, soft laugh from Will. “I looked at his spouse, at his closed lids and the delicate webbing of blue veins crossing his pale skin, and just considered him. “Your father was going to send Mina?”

“No, he most certainly was not going to send Mina,” Will corrected him, shifting down into the pillows with a little noise of pain. “That was the crux of the matter. I believe the rumors around your former wife affected his decision.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed and he considered that, his body tense as the coach rocked and swayed.

“He hoped to spare her and send you in her stead?”

“It seemed the most pleasing option,” Will said, stifling a tired yawn, “caring for her as he does and caring so little for me. Sending me settled the issue to everyone’s satisfaction.”

“Except yours,” Hannibal said, angry on his behalf.

“My satisfaction has always been incidental,” Will said, and managed to do so without even a hint of disapproval. “Mina hoped I would find happiness with you. Rather, more happiness with you than I found with our father.”

“She bamboozled you,” Hannibal flatly said, finding yet another reason to dislike Will’s sister. “She preferred you go in her place in case I should take it to mind to murder another wife?”

The comment got his mate to open his eyes again, assessing him. “She is not so cold as that, Hannibal. She was spoken for and feared my fate should I remain in our father’s house once she married. She hoped to see me happily settled. The circumstances in which we found ourselves cannot be mistaken as her fault.”

Hannibal subsided, chastened by Will’s graceful way of seeing the best in those around him.

“The happiness you hoped to find with me, Will,” Hannibal said, holding his melancholy blue gaze. “I hope I can return it to you in excess of your expectations.”

“Are you asking that I have expectations of you, Hannibal?” Will murmured, his lids dropping to half-hood his eyes, which glittered like jewels behind his enviable black lashes.
“I am hopeful,” Hannibal said, and his slight smile teased an answering one from his mate.

“Then trying to be friendly with my sister might be a good place to start,” Will said, closing his eyes again.

“She is your sister,” Hannibal admitted, taking a deep breath eloquent of being put upon. “Whatever my feelings, she shares your blood and that can excuse a multitude of sins. Considering I am stuck with her for the rest of her life, I suppose we must get along. Heavens knows how her husband has managed. It is little wonder she has taken up residence at Hartford House.”

“Hannibal!”

He hastily delved into his travel bag in order to avoid being scolded and made a low exclamation of relief, saying, “Bless that Berger, he packed a paper for us.”

He settled back and stretched one booted foot out onto the seat Will had vacated in order to justify his earlier statement and opened the paper, immediately redirecting the conversation with, “The Museum of Science and Industry is having a new exhibit in, the marvels of modern science.”

“Rather difficult to be taken seriously as an institution in support of science with an entire wing of religious disclaimers clogging up the place,” Will breathed, eyes still closed so that he missed his husband’s delighted glance at him.

“It is counter intuitive, yes,” Hannibal agreed. “How did you know it was such?”

“Jimmy took a holiday in the Capital last year,” Will said, wriggling into the cushions. “He told me all about it.”

Hannibal absorbed that one, and said, “I never thought to ask if you’re a religious man, Will.”

“Not that you’re asking now, but I’m not,” Will said, slitting one eye cautiously. “Rather, my perception of religion has no relation to acceptable notions.”

“You believe in the Gods?”

“I believe in reason,” Will said, smiling a bit. “And... something bigger than us all. I’m not sure I would call it a god, unless men are gods.”

“Of course we are,” Hannibal said, settling back to relish the intriguing conversations his husband seemed to inspire. “We create life, and take it. We see a river and we dam it. We find an ocean and we cross it. What is that if not a god?”

“A menace,” Will said, chuckling. “At least to those we find along the way in our quest to expand our tottering Empire.”

Hannibal laughed, well pleased, and amused the both of them by reading the paper aloud, even to the smallest print, often stopping to debate some point or another with Will.

They stopped for a late hamper lunch at a posting house at midday, the two of them enjoying their meal in the shade while the coachmen changed horses and the others went within to refresh themselves.

Francis drank a handful of water from the pump and settled into the shade just out of earshot, though with a clear view of them.

“I do hope you appreciate your Mr. Dolarhyde’s dedication,” Hannibal said, shooting a dark look at Francis. “It’s as if he expects me to suddenly murder you the moment he looks away!”

Will heaved a sigh, unable to get very comfortable even beneath the spreading oak branches that shaded them. “At least with such continuous attention, I will not find myself taken by surprise.”

“I pity anyone who so foolishly risks your retribution for doing so,” Hannibal remarked, preparing a painkilling draught and pressing it into Will’s hand, brooking no argument. “You are pale as a sheet and sweating again, Will. Please, take the medication.”

Will did so, the ache strong enough to compel him.

“Thank you,” Hannibal said, relieved. “I know it makes you tired, but you are recovering quickly and this can only help.”

They set back on the road with Will in his mound of pillows, but instead of falling asleep, he perked up considerably after the worst of his ache was chased away. They both knew it was only a matter of time before the medicine rendered him too sleepy to resist the lure of the pillows, but Will’s growing excitement as they headed towards the Capital kept him from going down easily.

Hannibal had secretly dreaded the endless hours and countless stops at posting houses, but Will, as always, made everything entirely unpredictable. His wonder alone at venturing past the boundaries of Hartford estate was enough
entertainment all on its own, but his questions—sharp and intelligent, the answers seized with an endless appetite for information—kept up an exchange of the likes Hannibal had not had the pleasure of since University.

There was no subject on which Will had complete knowledge, but no subject on which he had none at all, and they compared, bantered, and argued away the hours. It was truly another side to his mate that Hannibal was profoundly charmed by, especially as the more intense his words became, the more bright-eyed and unselfconscious Will was. He made his points with passionate, earnest eagerness and ready laughter, his usual reserve somewhat loosened by the pain killer and his growing comfort with Hannibal.

Eventually, however, their vigorous discussions and the painkiller sapped his energy and Will's lids drooped. He slumped into sound slumber, lolling bonelessly against the cushions and unresisting when Hannibal gently eased him around and cradled him to keep him in place.

It was very late when they arrived, but Berger was there waiting for them, having roused the staff into action. Will never woke from his easy, much-needed slumber, not even when his husband carried him up to their suite and tucked him securely into his bed, whispering into the curve of his ear, “Welcome to Marsham Heath, Lord Clarges.”

**Chapter 24**

Will woke in slow, comfortable degrees, blessedly free of his headache. The unfamiliar sounds of an unfamiliar household filtered into his awareness as surely as the strong mid-morning sunlight, but not quite as quickly as the warmth of a large, decidedly male body curled like armor around him.

Will's eyes widened to painful proportions and he wriggled with offended outrage, snared in layers of sheets and warm blankets, in the folds of his nightshirt and the tangle of limbs, somehow managing not to wake his sleeping husband.

“Hannibal!” he hissed, freeing one hand from the depths of the bed to shove at the heavy body half pinning him. The scent of Hannibal's skin mingled with his own, creating a perfume that made his body prickle with warmth. “Hannibal, wake up!”

Hannibal murmured something in his sleep and rolled just enough to ease the tension on the covers. Flushed and panting, Will wiggled to sit up and glower at his sleeping husband while he caught his breath. He pushed his hair out of his face and wiped at his sweat-glazed brow, amazed by the heat Hannibal was putting off.

“You really do sleep like the dead!” Will complained, giving him a sour shove.

A soft knock at the door sent Will diving back under the covers, cursing floridly under his breath when Hannibal's arm snaked around him and he tucked Will close into the curve of his body.

“My Lords?”

“Come in, Mr. Berger!” Will called, his voice thin with embarrassment.

His embarrassment doubled when his imagination provided him with a detailed vision of what precisely was pressed to his round bottom, separated only by the layers of their nightclothes and underthings.

It was certainly enough to send him slithering from the side of the bed in a heap of outraged dignity to find his feet on the cold rug, hoping for the sake of his pride that Berger hadn't seen him.

“Ah, Lord Clarges, you're up!” Jimmy said, pattering into the room while Berger was in the dressing room. “And how are we this morning?”

“Hosting a breakfast, by the look of things,” Hannibal said, his voice raspy with the early hour. He lifted his head to glare towards the dressing room, then at Jimmy, and asked, “Why are you all in here?”

“Why are you in here?” Will asked, picking up a pillow and whacking him with it, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“This is our bedchamber,” Hannibal said, snagging the pillow and pulling it towards him, and Will along with it. Will was forced to let it go or else be tucked under Hannibal's chest as the pillow was. It annoyed him to the tips of his toes that part of him wished he had been.

“Wait, our bedchamber?” he asked belatedly, looking to Jimmy for answers. His smiling valet turned with abrupt haste and made himself busy in the washroom, leaving Will to level another glare at his husband's back. “Our bedchamber?”
“Marsham Heath is a very small holding, Will,” Hannibal said, his voice muffled by the pillow he’d nuzzled into. “The staff weren’t expecting us. Our arrival was quite the surprise, despite Berger’s small warning.”

Will’s chin tipped up and he moved closer, asking, “But there are more bedchambers?”

Hannibal lifted his head again and rolled to look at Will, who didn’t give ground or even blush.

“I’m tempted to say there aren’t.”

Will’s nostrils flared with his sudden intake of breath and he said with admirable menace, “You are lucky there are witnesses.”

“Not as lucky as I am that you don’t snore,” Hannibal said, slumping back into the pillows and chuckling at Will’s soft snarl. “Welcome to Marsham Heath, Will.”

It gave Will a slight jolt of excitement despite the circumstances and he went to the nearest window to pull back the drapes, ignoring his husband’s admonishment when the blinding morning light poured in.

Trees blanketed everything almost as far as the eye could see, but in the distance lay a haze of thin gray clouds in the air and the barest impression of the Capital beneath it.

“We passed it in the night,” Will murmured, pressing his hand to the glass. “I’m sorry I missed it.”

“You didn’t miss much,” Hannibal said, rolling onto his back and sitting up, the open throat of his nightshirt revealing his chest and the light furring of hair over his heart. Will’s eyes focused on it despite himself and he turned back to the window so abruptly he almost smacked his nose into the glass. “It was so late no one was about except drunks staggering home. But the gas lamps are rather pretty. We’ll visit a time or two while we’re here, perhaps even stay over in the Townhouse so you can see them.”

Will looked at him with such ill-concealed excitement that Hannibal grinned. “We can remove to the Townhouse if you take a shine to the city. I think it will exhaust you with entertainment.”

“I hope so,” Will said, moving away from the window to reach another across the room, his toes spreading against the soft nap of the cold carpeting. “I do wish to put sight to the places I’ve read about.”

He tugged the dark, heavy drape wide open and gazed out at the world before him. The window faced the front of the house, which was situated on a hill just a short jaunt from a large town spread out all the way to the distance, as if stretching towards the road connecting it to the Capital just a few hours away.

Will’s eyes swept the entire city, amazed by its size and grandeur.

“Why is the estate called Marsham Heath?” he asked, absorbed with drinking in the new sights before him.


“I had noticed,” Will said, thumbing through the pages of his memory for the facts he’d accumulated on this estate.

“Impressive for a mining town, isn’t it?” Hannibal said, pausing in the act of rising from his bed just to admire the sight of Will standing at the window. The morning light cascaded through his nightshirt, outlining the firm sweep of his body beneath in a hazy silhouette. It caught the gleams of light brown in his dark curls and crowned him with gold. There was something touchingly innocent in the way he looked back at Hannibal, his blue eyes bright with excitement, something which brought Hannibal to the window next to him to see the world from his perspective.

“Forestry was once the chief industry of Marsham Heath,” Will said, his skin prickling with the heat of Hannibal’s body next to his. “Now I see why.”

“Ah, yes, but the lure of riches was too great to resist and mining has made this town quite prosperous in its own right,” Hannibal said, smiling down at the city he hadn’t properly seen since his childhood.

“It truly shows,” Will said, and tapped the glass in the direction of a particularly beautiful home. “Who lives there? It’s such a grand house!”

“That would be the Crawfords,” Hannibal supplied, looking over his shoulder at their respective valets bickering quietly in the dressing room. “Jack and his wife, Phyllis, though everyone calls her Bella. He owns the remaining shares of Grandfather’s mines. He is also both the Mayor of the city as well as the Magistrate. I met him once when I was younger, rather imposing character at the time. I imagine we shall have an invitation to dine with them once word gets out.”

“Magistrate as well as Mayor,” Will mused, impressed. “He must have mediated some interesting cases.”
“That I rather doubt,” Hannibal said, chuckling. “The town is still quite rural, Will, for all its modern niceties. I cannot imagine much of interest ever happens here.”

“I certainly hope not,” Will said, sighing when he thought of the situation they had left behind at Hartford House. “I am looking forward to some peace and quiet.”

“I imagine so.” Hannibal reached out and smoothed Will’s hair back with a gentle smile, asking, “Does your head hurt much?”

“No, thank you,” Will said, allowing the inspection and lifting tentative fingers to feel the lump on his head. “It’s gone down and I’m hardly sore at all.”

“That is good news,” Hannibal told him, relieved to see that the bump had settled and lost its livid coloring, though the purple-on-green bruise was still worrisome. He traced the arch of Will’s brow with his thumb, delighted by the spasm of irritation that furrowed his smooth forehead, his amusement replaced by warmth and affection as he gazed down at his spouse.

Will’s lush mouth parted just enough to bare the tips of his pearly teeth and his eyes flicked up as he whispered, “What is it?”

“I have tried twice to kiss you,” Hannibal murmured, gazing at him with his amber eyes half-lidded.

Will’s pink tongue darted out to wet his plump lower lip but his chin tipped up and he corrected, “Once, Lord Clarges. You have tried once. The first time was merely for show.”

Hannibal chuckled at that. “We keep getting interrupted. Perhaps—”

“Lord Clarges, beg your pardon, but the maids got you sorted,” Berger said, emerging from the dressing room with Hannibal’s travel valise and boots in hand. “This is the last of it. I’ll get your shaving water ready.”

“And your water is drawn, Lord Clarges,” Jimmy said to Will, pronouncing the title with particular relish.

Hannibal dropped his hand with an amused sigh, feeling a pang of disappointment.

“It looks as if there are more bedchambers after all,” he said, and felt compelled to add, “Much to my vast dissatisfaction.”

Will stepped away from him with a small half smile on his full lips, saying, “If you’ll excuse me, Hannibal.”

Hannibal watched him make his way into the washroom, glancing back once over his shoulder, thoughtful and assessing, but with a hint of awareness that warmed Hannibal to see.

“One of these days we won’t be interrupted,” he mused, watching the door close. But he knew he had some issues to settle before he could take any real satisfaction or pleasure in wooing his spouse.

With his mind firmly settled on his plans, Hannibal left Will’s suite for his own newly-made-up bedchamber and told Berger, “Have horses prepared for us, Berger. You and I have some traveling to do today. Did you warn the Misses I would be arriving?”

“Didn’t think I should in case plans changed,” Berger said. “They was glad to get the warning and ain’t seen hide nor hair of him so far. Will you miss breakfast, m’Lord?”

“No,” Hannibal said, moving to the stand where his shaving water waited, steaming and hot. “After breakfast will do.”

The sooner he left, the sooner he would return, he knew, but he didn’t want to miss spending some time with Will this morning.

He’d missed quite enough time already, and he found himself greedy for more.

Will made short, efficient work of washing up, as he always did, while Jimmy bustled about settling things he’d had no chance to tend the night before.

“Is Francis nearby?”

“Outside of your doorway,” Jimmy said, his smile tight and false. “As always.”

“Jimmy, please try to like him for my sake,” Will said. “He is here to protect me.”

“I will try, Lord Clarges, but he unsettles me,” Jimmy said, concern pinching his round features as he set out Will’s clothing. “There is something about him… like a strange dog you’re never sure will bite you.”

“Francis doesn’t bite, Jimmy,” Will said, summoning a soft chuckle despite the concern it raised. He trusted Jimmy’s judgment and if his pleasant valet found fault in Francis, then it wasn’t without reason.
With Jimmy’s assistance, he was dressed and ready in record time and emerged onto the landing to find Francis just beyond his doorway. He caught Hannibal’s scent there, as well, the strong, warm-earth and comforting fragrance easily more detectable than the faint hot ashes and leather scent that swirled around Francis Dolarhyde.

“Good morning, Lord Clarges,” Francis said, casting his eyes down and dipping his head, as if every greeting required a show of abasement.

“Good morning, Mr. Dolarhyde,” Will said. “Please, you needn’t be so formal. I have no idea how you were treated in my sister’s house, but here you are more friend than servant, whatever role you may play.”

Francis’ blue eyes flicked up, uncertain and seeking. When Will smiled at him, he lifted his head and smiled in return.

“Walk with me, please,” Will said, deciding to take advantage of their momentary privacy for their conversation.

Francis fell into step lagging just a pace behind him, a trailing, hulking shadow at his back. He didn’t start or react in any way when Will said, “I want you to promise me that you will not attempt to hurt Hannibal.”

Will paused on the landing near the stairs, waiting to see if there would be a reply.

“Francis, you spoke to me of being my friend,” he said, turning to face the silent Alpha behind him. “You spoke of taking action against a threat towards me when the understanding was that Hannibal embodied that very threat. I can assure you now that is not the case. I must adamantly insist that no action is to be taken against my husband.”

Francis stared at him, the dragon within him pushing against the man without, sharp claws and bloody snout and starving gullet. It sharpened the scent of him to sulfur, an acrid, unpleasant trace of sourness that prickled Will’s sinuses.

“If anyone tries to hurt you, Lord Clarges, I will stop them,” he said, the words harsh despite being whispered, knife-sharp and dangerous, his eyes blazing with fervor.

“Then that should settle it,” Will said, merely gazing at him, too inured to the threat of violence to be intimidated by such a show, “as Hannibal will never try to hurt me. He is a soldier, Francis, with nearly a decade of combat service in his experience. I cannot trust that he would show restraint were you to threaten him. I cannot guarantee you would survive such rash action. I say this out of concern for the both of you—do not challenge my husband. You are an intelligent man, Francis. You can see how unwise it would be.”

Francis stared at him, unblinking.

“Hurting Hannibal would hurt me, Francis,” Will said, changing tactics, “and that would violate your oath to protect me, would it not?”

Francis clenched his teeth, hands curling into tight fists at his sides, but he dropped his head and murmured, “Yes, Lord Clarges. I understand.”

“They will hold you to your promise, Francis,” Will said, a note of warning in his firm voice. “And trust that you will keep it.”

Hannibal was already comfortably seated in the modest dining room when he heard footsteps heading towards him. Mr. Thatcher, the aged butler, promptly opened the door with perfect timing.

Will came in heralded only by the faint perfume of his sweet scent. Still lacking the rest of the clothing Hannibal had purchased for him, he was dressed in his usual sober wardrobe which only served to highlight his pale skin and the shiny gloss of his curls, rendering that full mouth of his the somber pout of a tragic poet. It was little wonder people grew silent when he approached. Such beauty required a moment to admire it.

“Good morning,” Hannibal called, smiling when Will tipped his head, only making bare eye contact. “You look very lovely.”

Will laughed softly and looked over his shoulder, saying, “That is very kind of you, Lord Clarges, but I believe a word such as ‘handsome’ would suit Mr. Thatcher much better than ‘lovely’.”

He seated himself at the table, genuinely amused as he unfolded his napkin.

“Yes, handsome would suit Mr. Thatcher rather better than lovely,” Hannibal agreed. “But I wasn’t speaking to him, Will. I was speaking to you.”

“Well,” Will said, faint pink flushing his cheeks. “Mr. Thatcher? Could you bring a fresh pot of tea? I believe there is something the matter with this one. It has had a strange effect on his Lordship.”
“Leave it, Thatch, thank you. And I am not suffering from spiked tea, Will,” Hannibal said, brows rising when Will’s own brows lowered, agitation coloring his features. “I am complimenting you.”

Will gave up all pretense of attempting to have his breakfast and stared at Hannibal. After a long moment, he asked, “What are you about, Hannibal?”

“Excuse me?”

“I have lived with my appearance far longer than you’ve had the occasion to look upon it,” Will said, a soft smirk curving his lips. “I am more than aware of its paltry sum. Therefore, I can only surmise there is some purpose to your flattery?”

Those flashing blue eyes met his, teasing, but brimming beneath with something else that in all honesty was hurt.

‘Do you think yourself handsome, Will? Pretty, perhaps? It must be upsetting to realize that you are not as pretty as you think you are. When I was told I had a wife waiting for me, I did not expect someone so particularly plain as you...’

“The purpose of my flattery, if you must call it that, is to repair the damage I have done,” Hannibal said. “I find you lovely, Will. In truth, I find you beautiful. And when I am enjoying the sight of you, I will tell you so.”

Will blinked. “Then I am content never to hear it from you again and we can put this strange encounter behind us as a badly-laid joke. Have you any plans for the morning?”

“Will—”

“I am in danger of becoming agitated, Lord Clarges,” Will warned him, giving him a stern look. “Please do not persist. I realize your humor is beyond perverse and usually I would appreciate that, but it is early in an otherwise pleasant day and if you press me, you may find yourself in peril.”

“Well, then at great risk to my personal safety, I will inform you that I am resolved, Will. If you will not stand to hear me call you beautiful, then I will kiss you every time I think to say it,” Hannibal said with the satisfied air of a cat who got the cream. “I did win our little wager, after all.”

Will turned pink to the tips of his adorable ears and fumbled with his silverware in surprise.

“You never!”

“You dropped your book,” Hannibal reminded him, grinning when Will glared at him. “When you were scolding me about mistaking rooms again.”

“No,” Will said, blinking rapidly as he seized on that moment, recalling all too clearly how he had, indeed, dropped his book and been distracted. “Those were not the terms of our wager!”

“Were they not?” Hannibal queried, delighted.

“No, as you well know it!” Will said, and added in a scandalized, hushed whisper, “It was whether you could distract me from my book while we were... otherwise engaged.”

Hannibal cocked one eyebrow up and chuckled, admiring that he didn’t back down in the least. “I never said that. I distracted you from your book, so I won. Or will you go back on your word?”

“I would never do so, Hannibal!” Will told him, his voice sharp and clipped.

Hannibal quirked one brow and reached for him, smug when Will skated a skittish, uncertain glance his way. The glance grew into rounded, wide eyes that quickly narrowed, priming for a fight as his husband’s hand drew near.

Hannibal, though, merely took his hand and planted a soft, tea-sweet kiss on Will’s knuckles. He got a split second of compliance, instinctive reaction to the affection Will had gone so long without before Will pulled away with a dark glare, leaving Hannibal smiling at him.

“You are beyond incorrigible!” Will informed him, buttering his scone with a gentle grace that belied his dark tone.

“And you are delightful when you are agitated,” Hannibal said. Unable to resist, he added, “provided you have nothing to fling at my person.”

The comment earned him another dark glare, but amusement sparked in Will’s blue eyes along with some measure of pleased delight that his methods did not go unnoticed.

Hannibal grinned, the tips of his sharp Alpha teeth bared as he said, “Prepare yourself to be kissed quite often, Will, unless you would prefer for me to say it?”

“No, I would not, and you’re being absurd,” Will said, rallying despite his embarrassment. He took a cautious nibble of his scone and dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. “I am not now and have never been beautiful, Lord Clarges. There are some
things even insistence simply cannot change. Sow’s ears do not become silk purses and wallflowers do not become beauties just because you demand it. There is a limit even to your power.”

“Is there?” Hannibal asked, enjoying the mute, fiery spark in his blue eyes. “I have never noticed that to be the case.”

“Of course you haven’t!” Will scoffed, taking a sip of his tea before saying, “Your ego would never allow for the possibility!”

Hannibal chuckled but said nothing, merely continued his breakfast, relishing the comfortable ease of being with his mate. He had never imagined they would deal well with one another in any respect, but the more time they spent together, the more Hannibal realized that they were incredibly well suited.

Now he only had to convince Will of that.

“You inquired about my plans, so I will tell you that I’ve made arrangements with Magistrate Crawford’s men and our staff to make you comfortable today,” Hannibal said, sipping his tea. “I would very much appreciate it if you would limit yourself to the House and the garden for now, Will. You’re still very close to your injury and shouldn’t push yourself with too much exercise.”

Will looked over at him, questions in his blue eyes. “Are you leaving, Hannibal?”

“I have some business to take care of at Galley Field,” Hannibal said, refilling Will’s tea and putting another scone on his plate. “I won’t be long, but I wanted to get it taken care of before anyone properly knows we are here, in order to reduce the risk to you. When I return this evening, there is a great deal I should like to tell you. But I must get everything settled before I attempt to do so.”

Will absorbed that, recalling that Galley Field was less than two hours’ distance from Marsham Heath, opposite the Capital. The estates were nearly neighbors in the grand scheme of things, he knew, and he scolded himself for not recalling before now.

Not even twenty-four hours into their flight from Hartford, and his husband was winging off to see his proper family. Little wonder, then, he had attempted such useless flattery. As if Will could ever be diverted by flowery words of praise without substance.

“There is no hurry to return to your present company. I have done well enough on my own for six years, Lord Clarges,” Will reminded him, his husband’s announcement tipping the scales of what had occurred between them in the past few days, confirmation of him being entirely as typical and predictable as a man—especially an Alpha—could be. It gave Will a certain cruel pleasure to say to Hannibal, “And Francis will be with me.”

“Francis is to accompany staff to go collect your wardrobe directly from Avery’s sister store. I am hopeful the whole of it is finished,” Hannibal told him, trying to coax a smile from him, aware of the way Will shuttered himself back up and knowing well enough the cause. “Though I must admit, you make a fine Chaplain.”

“Francis will stay with me,” Will said, in no mood now to be cajoled with teasing. He met Hannibal’s gaze directly, brooking no argument, and said, “Jimmy may go, but Francis is entirely at my disposal.”

“Will, Francis is dangerous—”

“Fortunately for us all, I am used to being continuously disappointed in my estimation of the men around me,” Will said, settling his teacup into its saucer with care. “Have a safe journey, Lord Clarges.”

“Will—” He got to his feet as Will did, but his little mate vanished through the door with his shoulders squared and his back ramrod straight, a slender soldier victorious from the battlefield.

Hannibal slumped back into his chair with a tired sigh, annoyed that he’d had no chance to explain himself to Will or tell him what he planned to do. In the future, he knew, he would put the cart before the horse if necessary, as long as Will had the answers he needed to be content.

With little other recourse and with both Magistrate Crawford's men and the entirety of the remaining staff set to keep a close eye on his mate, Hannibal pushed to his feet and went to inform Berger they were leaving.
What lay ahead of him was uncertain enough and he was already anxious to get back and explain things to Will with a clear conscience.

The House at Marsham Heath was, indeed, an old and rustic structure, but staffed with lovely and kind people who stayed year-round despite the lack of the family's presence. Will, true to his nature, immediately applied himself to the land agent's office attached to the near-empty stables and made the acquaintance of one Mr. Wells, who was gruff but quickly warmed up when Will expressed an interest in the estate details, starting with the house proper.

“What can I do to improve the lives of those here at Marsham Heath, Mr. Wells?” Will asked, watching him gather the requested documentation into a packet he was to deliver to the house proper. “This place has sat accruing value for years—at least six—and there must be some measure of margin that can be applied to renovations, if only for the sake of those who live here.”

“Plumbing, Lord Clarges,” Mr. Wells said, a worn smile baring his teeth. “Proper piping. The rest of the town has it, but Marsham has never been updated. It’s been near twenty years since a Lecter stepped foot here, to be sure.”

“Have you anyone you can recommend?” Will asked, determined to do precisely what he’d intended to do when he first suggested coming here—fix things.

It helped that it had the secondary purpose of distracting him from his husband’s hasty, near-immediate flight from his presence into the arms of his mistress.

Mr. Wells had several good recommendations and Will spent a goodly portion of the day with him in his office laying plans, looking at the technical drawings of Marsham Heath drawn up some years back and plotting how best to plumb the House without disturbing the integrity of the structure.

Satisfied to have made some headway in feeling useful after his accident, Will collected Francis from his restless pacing outside the door and headed back up to the House for luncheon.

A young maid was laying out a small table in the back garden for him at Will's request, the wind catching and teasing strands of dark hair loose from the bun at her nape. She paused when she spied Will and a pink flush rose on her freckled cheeks.

“I'm sorry, Lord Clarges, I meant to be done before you arrived.”

“No, that's fine...”

“Abigail,” she said, smoothing her apron and offering a little bob curtsy that was more a nervous gesture than a sign of respect. “Abigail Hobbs.”

“It's fine, Miss Hobbs,” Will said, smiling to assure her and taking his seat. “Mr. Dolarhyde? Could you bring another chair, please? I have no wish to lunch alone.”

“The staff are coming, Lord Clarges,” Francis said, eyeing the girl as if she offered an unknown threat. “I’ll wait until you’re not alone.”

Will was beginning to sympathize more with his sister's summation of Francis being impassioned in his discharge of duty. He glanced back at Abigail to find her staring at him, a strange yearning in her blue eyes and a slight smile on her lips.

“Abigail?”

“Excuse me,” she said, shaken free of her odd fascination. “I-I beg your pardon, my Lord, you just... you look different than I imagined you would.”

Will's brows rose at that and she hastened to say, “I mean, for being at war ten years and—”

Will couldn't restrain his soft laugh and her look of horrified embarrassment was so abject he hastily said, “No, Abigail, please, don’t be offended! I apologize, but I am the other Lord Clarges. My husband is the doctor who served in the war. He left quite early. You must have missed him.”

She uttered a soft laugh of relief, her smile wide and beautiful, and said, “I am so sorry, Lord Clarges! I didn't realize! You were here already when I came up this morning and I thought you were... the other Lord Clarges.”

“Never worry, it’s a confusing business,” Will assured her, still chuckling. “You live in the town, then, Miss Hobbs?”

“Yes, with my parents, but—”

“Miss Hobbs, run along, please,” Mr. Thatcher instructed, arriving with a footman bearing Will's luncheon.
“No, Mr. Thatcher, it's quite alright,” Will said, waiting for the tray to be settled and unloaded. “If I might request two chairs? Mr. Dolarhyde and Miss Hobbs will be joining me. Please prepare another tray, if it isn't too much bother.”

“My Lord, Miss Hobbs has duties—”

“I will not keep her overly long,” Will said, insisting. “She is a native to this estate and I am a stranger. I should like to get her perspective.”

 Entirely taken aback by the oddity of the request, Mr. Thatcher nonetheless said, “Of course, my Lord. Of course.”

The thick forests of Marsham Heath gave way to the rolling fields that surrounded Galley Field and Hannibal smiled softly, anticipating seeing his little family again despite what he’d tasked himself to do.

Galley Field, much like Hartford House, was an imposing stone structure occupying a large, well-tended park at the end of a tree-shaded gravel lane. It was not quite so large or grand as Hartford, but very fashionable all the same and Hannibal urged his horse into a canter, eager to reach it.

The door opened before he dismounted and Alana emerged, her belly softly rounded beneath the folds of her gown, her dark hair spilling around her pale face. Close behind her and just as eager came Margot bearing Marissa on her hip, and the little girl immediately squirmed to get down.

Hannibal grinned and dismounted with haste, relieved as always to see them healthy and happy.

“Hannibal! Berger, you should have said he was arriving! Shame on you!” Alana said, quick despite the bulk of the baby and tugging Hannibal into an embrace without minding the travel dust.

“It was unexpected. We are temporarily at Marsham Heath,” Hannibal told her, sighing with happiness when her arms were joined by Margot’s and Marissa’s little hands found painful purchase in his hair. “Ah, you little devil! Are you driving the household mad?”

“Always,” Margot said, dislodging Marissa’s grasping fingers and stepping back to offer her to him. Hannibal scooped her up easily and tickled her tummy, delighted by her shrieking laughter.

“How did you find Hartford House on your return?” Margot asked, ringing for service in the drawing room while Alana and Hannibal got settled.

“Absent of your father,” Hannibal remarked, letting Marissa down when she struggled and fondly watching her begin to make busy chaos with enviable speed. His gaze transferred to Margot when she took a seat, graceful and studied in the same cautious way as a doe. He waited until she settled before he asked her, “Did you know he was serving a sentence?”

“No, but it doesn’t surprise me,” Margot said, tension suffusing her at even the mention of her father.

“Fraud,” Hannibal said, stretching his arms along the back of the settee with a sigh, relaxing in the place he’d called home for the past six years, even before Alana and Margot had joined him. “He’d been mismanaging Hartford for years, fleecing quite a substantial sum, by the looks of it. Will immediately realized what was happening and had him arrested, though no funds were ever recovered. I imagine it all went to pay Mason’s debts.”

“Some,” Margot said with a wry, slight smile. “I’m sure it couldn’t touch what he’s managed. Please tell me you’ve had word of where he is.”

“No, I haven’t. I sent Berger to tell you the news the moment I was able. I’m nervous that his whereabouts are a mystery and I worry for your safety,” Hannibal sighed, rubbing at his forehead. “Ladies, I cannot stress to you how important it is that...
you open any and all letters from Mr. Tier! Your lives might very well depend on it! I don't imagine Mason would think to look
for you here, but be vigilant nonetheless."

“Trust me, he wouldn't make it past the gate,” Alana said, her usual sweetness hardening into pure menace. “I’d set the
dogs on him.”

“I certainly hope so,” Hannibal said, smiling when Marissa clambered back into his lap, her dress seam torn and her hair
untidy, but her smile entirely delighted. He stroked the warm dome of her skull and silky hair, sighing softly. After a
contemplative moment, he looked at the two women seated across from him and said, “Ladies, I’m afraid I’m here to announce
a change in our arrangement."

They exchanged a look, but it was Alana who spoke first, saying, “We haven’t had a chance to keep our promise to you,
Hannibal—"

“You are released from your promise to me, both of you,” he said, idly allowing Marissa to tug on his arm and toy with his
cuff. “You have offered a great deal of respite from an otherwise wearying world these past years, and that is payment enough
for the escape I offered you.”

Alana’s mouth pursed. Margot looked cautious and almost angry, prompting Hannibal to say, “You will, naturally, still
move to the campus once the School is completed. The arrangements for your house on the grounds will not be changed. For
now, I think it would be best to move you to the seaside near the garrison. I have friends among the soldiers who will check in
on you.”

“I would hate to leave Galley Field so close to delivering the child, but I suppose it is for the best,” Alana said, pensive and
troubled. “If Mason is unaccounted for, we are far too rural for comfort.”

“I will continue to support your household, of course, until you can drawn income from the School,” Hannibal said, “and
the stipend for Marissa and the child will remain, no matter the circumstances.”

“That’s too generous,” Margot said, her voice husky but taut. “Hannibal—"

“Margot, I know that your experiences with your father and brother have made you understandably hesitant to feel
indebted to anyone at all,” Hannibal said, the very seriousness of his tone making both women relax slightly, “but we rescued
one another. You are a gifted student, Margot, and will make a fine doctor.” He turned his piercing gaze to Alana, then, saying,
“And you are one of the very rare few I can trust to manage the School properly, Alana. You are pregnant, in part, because of
your promise to me, and this child will not suffer for a change in our plans.”

“This child will not suffer at all,” Alana firmly said, one hand on the rise of her belly. “He has a home, whether you are with
us or not.”

Hannibal swallowed hard, touched.

“That is what you’re saying, Hannibal, is it not?” Alana pressed. “That not just our arrangement, but our circumstances
have changed?”

“It is,” he admitted. “My return to Hartford House offered many surprises, not the least of which is my spouse.”

Alana and Margot smiled as if on cue, one smug, the other quietly happy.

“What?”

“Nothing, it will only put you in a snit,” Alana said, grinning. “It certainly wasn't a bet between us.”

“Wagering, ladies? Such scandalous conduct,” Hannibal said, surprised into soft laughter. He scooped Marissa back into
his lap when she lurched for open air and cradled her there, where she squirmed only a little before settling, happy to play with
his pocket watch.

“Well, we have set a new standard for scandal,” Margot said, lifting her trapped hand to press a kiss to Alana’s knuckles.

“Both of us living here with you in sinful debauchery as we do.”

“We have all benefited from that perception, but I will be sure your notoriety does not follow you to the School,” Hannibal
said, rocking the little one in his lap. “You have a new future ahead of you, ladies, as do I. But I will never forsake you, I can
promise you that, nor will I forsake this little darling right here.”

He gently tapped Marissa’s nose for emphasis and smiled down at her.

“I admit, I would hate for you to leave her,” Margot said, gazing at Marissa with such vast love in her eyes all else paled in
comparison. “She would miss you terribly, and you have always treated her as your own.”
“She is my own,” Hannibal said, stroking Marissa’s dark ringlets as she yawned, quite content to fall asleep in his lap. “I delivered her.”

“You know what she means, Hannibal,” Alana said, tenderly repressive. “Don’t tease Margot or I’ll be forced to become cross.”

She settled back in her seat and drew her legs up next to her, curving towards Margot, who shifted to cradle her.

“And then I will become cross,” Margot warned him, an admirable glint in her eyes.

“What a small chance I have always stood against that,” Hannibal said. “I will always treat Marissa as my own; neither she, nor either of you, nor the baby, will ever lack for anything. That was part of my promise to you, after all.”

“Love is an innocent sin we should not suffer for,” Alana softly said, her gaze growing distant, even as Margot’s face tightened with remembered pain. “You’ve kept your promise, Hannibal. We’re safe. We live untroubled and happy lives. Mason made us both so miserable… I’m proud that Marissa would think of a man like you as her father, instead.”

“Trust me, as a child whose father is a monster,” Margot said, her gaze steady but sheened in pain, “it’s better not to know where you truly came from. But will your husband feel the same?”

“I haven’t discussed any of this with him as yet,” Hannibal admitted. “I wanted to settle our situation to your satisfaction and see what you were comfortable with. While I may not be able to bring you all to live at Hartford under my protection, I am sure Will would not begrudge Marissa spending time enough with us to benefit from our position. He has an incredibly keen understanding of the people around him and would never be needlessly cruel. I will tell him everything, with your permission.”

Alana looked at Margot and softly said, “It’s your decision, Margot.”

Margot took a deep breath and said, “If you trust him with it, Hannibal, then it’s as much your story as ours. We spun the world a fairy tale to keep their tongues busy and their minds as far from the truth as we could manage. Alana and I… you know we never hoped we could have a family such as this. Your promise has given us a family.”

“Which makes me doubly responsible for the child you carry now,” Hannibal said. “Which makes him just as much mine as he is yours.”

“Ours,” Margot put in, the word quiet but firm.

“Ours,” Hannibal conceded.

“All this time, Hannibal, you’ve never once asked,” Alana said, watching him. “Don’t you ever wonder who his father is?”

“No,” Hannibal said, the answer immediate and firm. “Unless it was Thomas Marlow, in which case I am turning you all out immediately.”

Alana burst into laughter, horrified, and Margot said, “Please give us credit for taste, Hannibal. We were choosy with purpose and Thomas Marlow simply doesn’t measure up.”

“But he is such a dear, loving man!” Alana sighed, her laughter tapering. “One could never ask for a more staunch supporter than Mr. Marlow; however, I’m afraid we could never consider him a suitable father.”

“Would you like for us to tell you, Hannibal?” Margot asked.

Hannibal shook his head in the negative, thinking of Will and his vast capacity to trust when his entire life had taught him how deadly it could be. “It doesn’t matter to me. I will assume he is someone of importance to one or both of you and, frankly, it isn’t my business.”

“You were going to present this child as your heir, Hannibal,” Alana said, scolding him in that gentle way she had. “Though I maintain my stance that your grandfather would never have fallen for it.”

“Family isn’t determined by blood, as both of you know all too well,” Hannibal said, gazing with affection at both of them. “We have been a family here, have we not?”

“And now you will have another,” Alana said, adding with a sigh and an exaggerated swoon against Margot, “The romance.”

“The passion,” Margot said, brows rising over her expressive eyes. “You read far too many novels,” Hannibal said, chuckling at their playful teasing. Under their fond gazes, he quietly admitted, “He is… indescribably wondrous.”

“Well,” Alana said, her smile widening. “I guess you’ll just really have to try.”
“Indeed,” Margot said with relish. “We need every detail of the Omega who has managed to garner your good opinion in so short an amount of time.”

“I doubt I can do him justice,” Hannibal said, thinking of his feisty little mate, “but I shall certainly do my best.”

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After a delightful luncheon with both Abigail and Francis, who relaxed enough to finally exchange his scowl for a smile, Will decided he would take a walk and see more of the woods that pushed so close to the house proper.

“But Lord Clarges, we’ve been instructed to keep you near—”

“If you are with me, Francis, then I am near,” Will pointed out, tipping his face to the slight breeze and taking a deep breath. “My head is trying to ache again and I find myself restless.”

Francis cast an anxious look at the sun, prompting Will to tell him, “We won’t go far or be gone for long. I have no desire to cause problems, Francis, I just... I feel unsettled and in need of fresh air.”

Will smiled at him, relieved on that count, and headed across the lawn to reach the treeline.

It was peaceful within but not still. Nestled into the fronds of the evergreens and scattered throughout the soaring canopies of the towering wood were squirrels and birds at their noisome business against a backdrop of rhythmic tree frog song. Will stepped into the refreshing, cooler air beneath the towering branches and spotted a thin deer trail cutting through the abundant undergrowth. He made his way over to it with Francis on his heels, taking deep, relaxing breaths and absorbing the calm.

“How have you spent your time since last you saw me, Francis?” Will asked, hoping to distract himself from thoughts of Hannibal and the strange ache in his chest he had so desperately hoped not to feel.

“I went into the Navy, Lord Clarges,” Francis said, his husky voice sounding closer than Will expected. He picked up his pace some, not nearly as settled with Francis as he had tried to convince Hannibal he was. It felt strange somehow to be with an Alpha who was not family and not his husband, uncomfortable as a fine hair blown into the eye, nagging and impossible to ease.

“Did you see a great many places?” Will asked, spying an outcrop of stone up ahead, the beginnings of the rocks which led onto the greater areas of the mines.

“Enough places, Lord Clarges, that I was glad to come home to our shores,” Francis said. “I—”

He cut off suddenly and stopped with the same abruptness, snagging Will by the tail of his jacket with force enough to tug him back a step.

“Francis, what on earth?” Will asked, surprised that he would touch him, but the scolding died when he saw how Francis stared ahead like a bird dog pointing at prey, nostrils flaring and eyes wide. A twinge of unease gripped him and he whispered, “What is it?”


Will turned with grim determination to hurry back up the trail, and when Francis moved to stop him, he said, “Someone must be hurt! We might be the only ones to help them!”

“Lord Clarges—”

Will went around the rock outcrop and only just kept himself from slamming into someone coming from a cross trail.

“Lord Clarges!” Francis was at his side in an instant, drawing him back and away, his usual deference abandoned to bristling and genuine threat as he moved towards the stranger.

Will caught the coppery scent of blood and the stench of rancid lard, a combination that greatly tested the strength of his stomach. He stared at the man—the Alpha—and he stared at them, in turn.

He was dressed as a woodsman, skins and leather despite the heat, and glared at Will with his eyes showing white all around. He was as stunned to see an Omega in such a place as Will was to see a strange Alpha.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his shock echoing in his words.

“This is Lord Clarges, and you trespass on his lands,” Francis said, and the power he hid so well behind his diffidence showed itself, the lash of his Alpha voice making Will start. “What is your business here?”
“I’m Hobbs,” he said, looking from Francis to Will. “The groundskeeper.”

“Marsham Heath has no groundskeeper,” Will said, regaining his senses enough to notice the fresh blood on Hobbs’ hands and clothing, flecks of droplets freckling his skin. “Hobbs? Are you a relation of Abigail’s?”

“Abigail?” Hobbs echoed, his gaze turning icy. “And what do you know of my little girl, Lord Clarges?”

“That she is nothing like her father,” Will said. He sensed something fundamentally flawed with this man and it made him shorter in his temper than he wished. The scent of decay churned Will’s stomach and only seemed to agitate Francis, who trembled next to him with the force of his restraint. “Why is there blood on your hands?”

“I was hunting,” Hobbs snapped.

“I see no weapons,” Will said, shoulders squaring when Hobbs’ glare gained intensity. “And where is your prey?”

“That’s not your business, your Lordship.”

For a moment Will was sure Francis would flatten him for his pert reply, but instead the angry Alpha said, “You are poaching on his lands! You’re a thief, and you’ll answer him, else the Magistrate will hear of this!”

Hobbs sneered at him and turned that sneer on Will.

“Bonded to one and another on a leash, eh?” he asked, his tone nasty. “Do I sicken you, little Lordling? You’re sick, aren’t you? Just the scent of me turns your guts.”

“You’ll mind your tongue—”

“Francis,” Will sharply said, relieved when he backed down, though he was tense as a bowstring. “Mr. Hobbs, as I find your daughter a delight, I will excuse your comments and assume that this rude behavior of yours is the result of troubles I am not privy to. I hope the next time we meet, you are in a far better frame of mind and far less confrontational, for your own good. For now, please leave these woods and allow us to go on our way.”

Hobbs stared at him, his blue eyes wild with something primal, as if some part of his nature had twisted in on itself and left a suppurating wound that permeated his scent with corruption.

“You’re as unnatural as I am,” Hobbs said, and laughed. It was a forced, unhappy sound and tugged at Will’s nerves like a hook caught in a trout’s mouth. “How did you manage it? Bonding to someone without them—”

“The next insult will be the last I will tolerate,” Will said, stiffening with offense. “Be on your way, Mr. Hobbs. Now.”

Francis loomed towards him, which sent him on his way, though he craned to look back at them as long as he could.

“Well,” Will said, drawing a deep breath to clear his lungs of that unwholesome odor, though it seemed to linger in his nose in a way even Francis’ hot-metal scent couldn’t cover. “That was decidedly unpleasant.”

Francis stood with stiff readiness in the middle of the trail, staring in the direction Hobbs had gone, shoulders tense as if he expected the other Alpha to return and risk his ire.

“Francis?”

“We should go back, Lord Clarges,” Francis said, easing down by slow degrees. His blue eyes flicked over Will’s face as he turned, but he kept his thoughts to himself. “It’s dangerous to be in an unfamiliar place so far from others.”

Will frowned, unhappy with the idea of returning so soon, but he erred on the side of sense and admitted, “Yes, Francis. I think that would be for the best after all. My head is aching quite a lot now and I think I might need to lie down.”

He turned back the way they’d come, retracing their steps to the house once more, but his thoughts stayed there in the woods, dwelling on an Alpha who stank of blood and rot and wondering how on earth he’d seen the truth about Will’s twisted, ugly bond.

Chapter 25

The sun was already moving towards the horizon before Hannibal set out to return to Marsham Heath, plans settled behind him and the whole affair put to rest. By this time next week, Galley Field would be as empty and quiet as it had been when he had first arrived there over six years ago, fuming and hurt and plagued by nightmares, to take up residence in isolation.
His life couldn’t be more different now. What he had once sought to escape, he now rode towards, eager and anxious to be reunited. Will’s image blazed in his mind, in his heart, a brilliant light he strained to reach.

He tried, and failed, to plan what he would say to Will. He never could predict his mate in anything and did not trouble himself to do anything more than be prepared to tell him the truth, now that he had the details to supply in answer to the questions Will would most certainly ask him.

The little city of Moseley was lit by the time they passed through on their path to Marsham Heath, and the Capital was a haze on the horizon. The cloud of smog that had accumulated through the day reflected a yellow glow from the many street lamps, the light visible even from this distance.

The lamps at Marsham Heath were lit as well, a welcoming, beckoning path to guide him home, and Hannibal urged his horse faster, saying, “Quickly now, Berger, and we might make dinner!”

“That’d be welcome, m’Lord!” Berger called, his sturdy little horse catching up quickly.

Mr. Thatcher had the door open right as Hannibal reached it, leaving Berger to hand the horses off.

“Have I missed dinner, Thatch?”

“No, my Lord; however, his Lordship has requested a tray in his suite,” Mr. Thatcher said, locking up the front door for the night. “Just as well. The dining room truly isn’t as we should prefer. Would you like me to send a tray to your suite as well?”

“Has it gone up yet?”

“No, my Lord, not quite as yet,” Mr. Thatcher said, shuffling to his side. He should have been retired ten years ago, Hannibal realized. It was certainly time for him to honor his duty to the people in the Lecter family’s care.

Hannibal debated a moment, long enough that Mr. Thatcher asked, “Should there be some change, my Lord?”

“No, Thatch, do as he’s said,” Hannibal told him. “But hold the tray for a moment. I’ll send Berger down with some instructions.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Thatcher said, and shuffled off as Hannibal moved rapidly upstairs.

Marsham Heath was not nearly on as grand a scale as Hartford House, being mostly a hunting retreat, but it was comfortable and boasted a very well-kept, spacious library due to the fifth Duke’s aversion to hunting despite the predilection his spouse had for it. Hannibal thanked his good luck to have an education-minded ancestor who created such a lovely room, and laid his plans as he cleaned up and changed his clothes.

“Ah, Berger,” he said when his valet returned, and finished penning his small note. He folded it and handed it to Berger along with an antique silver box he’d claimed out of his belongings at Galley Field. “Here, take these belowstairs and see that they stay there, mind. I don’t want this wandering off.”

“Yes, m’Lord,” Berger said, taking the items. “Anything more?”

“Of course, m’Lord,” Berger said, taking the items. “Anything more?”

“Yes, some,” Hannibal said, taking a deep breath to calm his growing nerves. “Here’s what I need you to do...”

A soft knock on the door drew Will’s attention from the plans he was reviewing and he glanced up. “Come in.”

Francis moved through the doorway and to one side, saying, “It’s one of the servants with a tray, Lord Clarges.”

“Very good, Francis, thank you,” Will said, and paused in his perusal of the estate papers when the footman bore his tray in, nervous of Francis glowering at him.

“Francis, you may go downstairs and have your supper,” Will urged him, wondering how the man could stand such constant, intense watchfulness.

“Thank you, my Lord,” he said, and Will resolved to send him off for breaks more often, if only to have a few moments to himself.

The footman lifted the tray lid and stepped back, awaiting approval.

“Thank you,” Will murmured, but checked his move to approve it when he spied a very costly-looking antique silver box atop a folded piece of paper. “What on earth?”

His heart pounded, no little part of him fearing this would be another threat, that Marsham Heath was no more safe than Hartford House, that they would have to pack everything up and move again and even Hannibal might not be able to find him...
His hands trembled as he unfolded it, but he resolutely began to read.

Will,

Please do me the honor and grace me with the pleasure of your company in the library where we may share a simple dinner together. If you prefer to eat alone in your room, of course I will not resent you, I only wish to see you for a time before sleep takes us both to morning.

Please find with this note a token of my esteem. I hope you will wear it with pleasure, knowing that it is precious to me and with the expectation that my affections follow the giving, without presumption for their return.

Yours,

Hannibal

Will read it twice and looked up at the footman, bewildered.

“When did his Lordship return?” he asked, the words firm and even. He folded the note and tucked it into his waistcoat pocket behind his watch, his fingers lingering over it and his heart pounding.

“Half an hour and more ago, my Lord,” he was told, and Will glanced in the direction of Hannibal’s suite, wondering how he had not heard him.

“Is the tray not to your liking?”

“The tray will do nicely, thank you, only give me a moment, please,” Will said, and picked up the antique box.

It was weighty and silky-cold, warming to the touch of his fingers as if waking from a long slumber. He couldn’t resist running his fingertips over the filigree, admiring the intricacy of the work done, swirling vines and curled leaves and doves in various stages of repose. Will thumbed the small catch and slowly slid the lid open.

The red velvet lining was aged but vibrant. The scent of roses and faint perfume drifted up to him, the captured memory of someone who had once treasured this gift.

A silver ring lay within, half as long as Will’s ring finger, a stunning piece of art from a master craftsman. There were no jewels, nothing ostentatious to detract from the delicate swirls and crests that made an abstract picture which called to mind water flowing. The longer Will looked at it, the more he saw—the suggestion of a stag’s rack, the barest flash of a fish’s scale—a wonderland of fey forest creatures half in hiding in a landscape of silver.

Will swallowed hard when he turned the ring over and saw etched into the back, *Saule, my Fairy Queen, with all my love,* Cyrus.

Will put it back in the box with reverence, respectful of its meaning. Hannibal, he surmised, had very few mementos of the mother he had never met and he had trusted this one to Will’s hands.

‘I hope you will wear it with pleasure, knowing that it is precious to me and with the expectation that my affections follow the giving, without presumption for their return...’

‘I have some business to take care of at Galley Field... When I return this evening, there is a great deal I should like to tell you. But I must get everything settled before I attempt to do so...’

Will closed the box, taking a deep breath still tinged with the tang of perfume and roses. His faith had been thoroughly shaken by Hannibal’s quick defection, the part of him that was his father’s son condemning his actions from fear. It shamed him to know it, but the longer he had reflected on it, the more he realized that it was infinitely easier to believe the worst of his husband than it was to believe Hannibal might choose to put aside the life he loved for... for him.

“My Lord?”

Will looked up at the footman as he stood, donning his jacket with haste and clutching the box in his hand.

“Please take my tray back downstairs and let the staff have it, if they wish,” he said, moving towards the door. “I will be joining Lord Clarges in the library.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

‘I hope you will wear it with pleasure, knowing that it is precious to me and with the expectation that my affections follow the giving...’

It kept echoing in Will’s mind’s eye as if Hannibal had reached inside him and written it in his flesh. Those were not the sentiments of a man who intended to forsake him. Those were the sentiments of the man who had held his hand and gazed at him with tears painting trails down his stark cheekbones, insisting he regretted what had passed between them.
Insisting that he would bring their shattered potential together again.

Will's heart refused to slow its pace, thundering away in his chest while heat prickled his skin. He took the main stairs to the ground floor and paused before the library door, suddenly nervous and uncertain. He questioned himself, sure that he was misconstruing his husband's intentions. The cliff of his nightmares haunted the back of his mind, taunting him with its presence. The sheer drop it offered was almost as deadly as the feeling that woke in Will's heart at the thought of his husband. The two were, he knew, intimately tied together.

To love was the act of a fool. To be loved was simply inconceivable.

To have both was to plunge from the clifftop without hope of rescue or surety of the future, and it nearly overcame him, but he refused to allow it. He chastised himself for a coward and entered the library before he could go any further into that train of thought.

A fire burned with cheery warmth in the fireplace and several lamps were lit, throwing the room into a soft golden glow. A table had been set in the center of the room, a heavy candelabra lighting up a simple decoration of evergreen boughs with freshly-cut flowers and two place settings.

“Will,” Hannibal said, moving from the shadows near the window where he'd been looking out at the city below. He was somber as he moved into the light, his warm scent curling through Will's lungs and easing the tension that had risen since his departure. He drew a breath heavy with it, letting it wind through his senses with the promise of comfort.

“I was told you had returned,” he said, the words calm and soft. Yet when Hannibal heard them, he frowned in response to Will's reserve, knowing well enough what it hid.

“You thought I wouldn't,” he said, stopping several feet away, giving Will room to feel unimpeded, whatever decision he might make.

“I thought you would wish to visit with your family,” Will said, marveling at his own even calm, relieved to feel his somber detachment stay firmly in place despite the churning mire of emotions warring within him. “You do have a tendency to vanish.”

“I have no intentions of vanishing on you again,” Hannibal said, and his amber gaze dropped to the box Will held. “How do you find my gift?”

“Beautiful,” Will said, turning it once between his fingers with a small frown. He held it out to his husband, feeling a pang of disappointment from Hannibal like a physical touch. “I cannot accept it, Hannibal. It is indeed very precious, but both its meaning as well as your affections lie elsewhere.”

Hannibal made no move to touch the box or take it from him.

“No,” he said, the single word vibrant and throaty, rumbling with a throbbing Alpha undertone that reverberated through Will's chest all the way to his bones. “They do not.”

Will dropped his hand, holding the box against his stomach. He met Hannibal's piercing gaze, his blue eyes vivid and searching, braced as if for an oncoming storm.

“You went to Galley Field, Hannibal,” he said with a small, wry smile, but it bothered him. It bothered him more than he could properly make sense of and it showed in the way his calm slipped just enough to bare the turmoil beneath.

“I did,” Hannibal admitted, hands linked behind his back, angling his face down, the firelight chasing his perfect profile in orange and gold. “I went for several reasons, Will, one of which was to fetch my mother's ring for you. It is my only memento of her that I have. I knew you would appreciate its importance.”

“I went for several reasons, Will, one of which was to fetch my mother's ring for you. It is my only memento of her that I have. I knew you would appreciate its importance.”

“I wish for you to have it, Will, because you are the one who is most important to me,” Hannibal said, reaching out to close Will's fingers over the box with a soft squeeze, the strength in his hands waking a keen desire in Will to feel more of his gentle touch. His piercing amber eyes searched out Will's, deep and filled with hope. “And the note was the simple truth, Will. I would love nothing more than for you to wear her ring and allow me to be your husband in truth.”

Will's full lips parted, half shock, half aborted speech. He bit down on his lower lip before asking, “Did you say the same to Alana?”
“Alana has never seen nor touched this ring, and with good reason,” Hannibal said, his fingers curling over Will’s hand in a soft caress. “I have always kept it for the person I would share my life with as an equal. That person is you, Will. That person will always and only be you.”

Will’s long throat worked in a swallow, thoughts moiling in his eyes. Yet he said nothing, was not able to give voice to the sudden silence in him like the pregnant pause that follows the tolling of a bell. All of his life all he had ever wanted was to be part of a proper family, to be useful and important to someone, to have some small trace of love, and now his husband stood before him speaking as if such a thing were truly possible.

“T-that is...” His words escaped him, his arguments abandoned him. He wanted to remind Hannibal of all the reasons why such a thing could never be true, but every time he tried to do so, he found he couldn’t.

“I apologize for being so forward, but I must speak my mind. There is so much I have to tell you, Will,” Hannibal said, the heat of his body reaching Will even with distance, threaded with the enticing Alpha scent of him. “I wish to tell you everything, even the things which shame me.”

“I told you before that your willingness to speak of that which shames you does you credit, Hannibal,” Will said, grasping his self-control with all of his strength, wanting with everything in him to believe this could be true. He had fought so long alone that the prospect of Hannibal being in earnest almost overcame him.

Almost.

“Will...” Hannibal breathed, dropping his gaze. “I have not always conducted myself in ways that make me proud, as you well know. You have borne the brunt of my failings and suffered the consequences of my actions... I fear to add to your knowledge and build a wall between us which can never be breached. Yet, I would not keep the least of it from you, though it may hurt you.”

“I will hear it,” Will said, Hannibal’s desperate anxiety filling him through his bond. It roused him to respond, to offer comfort which served to bring his scattered thoughts and emotions back under control. He covered Hannibal’s hands with his own free one and squeezed to get his attention, saying again. “I will hear it, Hannibal. Even the things that may hurt me. I have hurt before.”

“And I have been responsible for all too much of it,” Hannibal said. “What wouldn’t I do to spare you, now?”

“To spare me is to pity me,” Will said, his voice as firm as his conviction, and just as unwavering. “Tell me what you need to tell me and I will decide when you have finished whether I will wear this ring... or fling something at your head.”

It coaxed a smile from his somber husband and Hannibal chuckled, lifting Will’s hands to his lips for a kiss and pressing his cheek against them like a great, purring cat.

“As you are my husband,” Hannibal said, lifting his head. “Then I shall do as you say. Come, join me. This is no more a tale for dinner than it is for a salon, but neither is it a story for an empty stomach.”

“That is rather dire,” Will said, his nerves making another appearance as Hannibal seated him at their little dinner table and rang for service. He put the silver box down next to the centerpiece, admiring the gleam of firelight on its surface and the potential which lay within.

Their dinner arrived without fanfare and was unpacked with efficient haste, no doubt under Hannibal’s instructions they be left alone.

Once they were, Hannibal took up his wine glass and remarked, “I know you have heard of my exploits in the Capital, Will, and you have mentioned Alana Bloom, as well as my daughter. I realize what I am to tell you will test your trust in me... I only ask that you hear me out before you decide whether you believe me or not.”

Will took a sip of his own wine and said, “Very well, Lord Clarges. Proceed.”

“Alana Bloom is not now and has never been my mistress,” Hannibal said, forsaking his food for the joy of watching his husband by firelight. The sight of Will was nearly as filling, he found, satisfying a hunger that had grown through the hours without him. “What we had was an arrangement—I promised to keep her and her family safe, and she promised to repay my kindness.”

“Safe from what, Hannibal?” Will asked, noting how uneasy his husband was.

“Miss Alana Bloom was once Mrs. Mason Verger,” Hannibal said, and Will sat back in his chair in surprise.
“Married?” he said. “I expected a great many things, Hannibal, but not that. Is she the reason why you track Mason Verger?”

“For her sake and for the sake of his twin sister, Margot, who lived with them when they first were wed,” Hannibal said, picking up his fork to take a few bites, fortification for what was to come. “Mason has always been a disreputable sort with the worst qualities a man can have, though his father praised him to the heavens.”

“I am aware,” Will said, musing, “When I first met Mr. Verger, he spoke of his absent son in terms of glowing praise. I admit I did not know him long before I realized his thievery and had him dealt with, but I did not expect the son he spoke of was married to your mistress.”

“Mason moved to the Capital on his father’s coin long before you arrived at Hartford House, and Alana is not my mistress,” Hannibal insisted, reaching for his wine again, though he had never been a man to find much fortification in spirits. “Mr. Verger thought so well of his son that he sent him off to gain a fortune through marriage with every confidence Mason would succeed. Mason has always been a wastrel, a cruel and careless man without morals or restraint. However, he can be charming when he chooses to be and he managed to worm his way into the acquaintance of the Bloom family.”

“I had heard that Miss Bloom was associated with the merchant family from the south of that same name,” Will said, curious now about the tale. When Hannibal sent him an inquiring gaze, he clarified, “No one would ever dare speak to me of her, of course, but I heard the odd bit of information betimes. I was in Hartford, Hannibal, not in a cloister.”

That brought a smile to his husband’s mouth, but the matter at hand was far too serious for him to be diverted for long.

“Yes, she was associated, as well as generously dowered and far too fine a prize for Mason to pass over, especially considering his gambling problem,” Hannibal said, a soft growl tingeing his words. “He maneuvered her into a very compromising position, ensuring the wedding would be quiet so as not to alert his creditors, and they settled in the Capital about the time I returned from the war.”

“What a vicious thing to do,” Will said, concern wrinkling his brow. He felt a pang of sympathy for her, this young woman he had tried so hard to never think of. She was not very much older than he was, he knew. She would have been younger even still when she met Mason, perhaps easily drawn into something she had no understanding of. “That must have been terrifying for her, being a young lady of good background put into such a position, trapped into marriage with a man who had used her in such a wicked way. I cannot imagine that made for much peace within their household.”

“No, it certainly didn’t, as I was later told. Her family paid her dowry on the condition that she never contact them again and Mason accepted,” Hannibal said, a frown wrinkling his brow. “He did not take advantage of the potential his marriage offered him. He continued to behave in the same reckless, selfish manner as he always had. Even when Mason’s twin sister, Margot, was sent to live with them, it did not keep him in check. He spent every penny of Alana’s dowry within a year.”

“All of it?” Will asked, stunned. One would be hard pressed to spend even his own modest dowry within a year.

“All seventy-thousand,” Hannibal said, and had Will not become accustomed to startling things, he might have spat out his wine.

He was accustomed, however, and swallowed instead, though his eyes widened with respect to the sum.

“When the creditors came knocking, he abandoned both Alana and Margot,” Hannibal said. “The two of them relocated to a boarding house and took in washing to live.”

“That must have been terribly difficult for them to adjust to,” Will said, because he could imagine it all too clearly—the beloved daughter of a monied family and her sister-in-law with no experience of labor, but finding themselves forced to adjust or starve. “What a shame her family would not help them. Surely, given the circumstances, they could rekindle their affections for her and set their anger aside?”

“She feared they would not and fear stayed her hand,” Hannibal said, shaking his head. “She already lost their respect by the manner of her marriage and Mason had made them no friends in his time with them. They essentially had no one to turn to.”

“Not even Mr. Verger, as he was imprisoned by that point,” Will said, grimacing at the implications.

“He wouldn’t have helped regardless,” Hannibal assured him. “Mr. Verger is a monster whose only love is for his son. Margot was treated more like a... family amusement than a daughter. Before she was sent to the Capital to be civilized by her
brother’s heavy hand, she was rarely allowed out of the house. Even families close to the Vergers had no idea she was Mason’s
sister.”
Will’s cheeks flushed with umbrage and his head tipped up, his mouth set in that stubborn way which Hannibal
immediately recognized as dangerous temper.
“A family amusement, you say?” Will asked, placing his wineglass down with care.
“Most unfortunately so. She has a brilliant mind and is so clearly her father’s better,” Hannibal said. “But yes, she was
treated abominably. Considering your experience with your own family, you know well enough what she must have suffered.”
Will’s mouth tightened, but his blue eyes were vague, his mind aligning his own experiences with those of this unknown
woman. “There is a kinship in suffering, is there not? It relieves me that I did not inadvertently add to her troubles.”
“No action you could dream of taking could have done so,” Hannibal said, filling his glass and Will’s own. “Miss Verger
knew nothing of his confinement. She is, understandably, not close with her father or brother.”
They ate in silence a moment longer as Will turned this information over, examining it carefully against his own
perception of the situation.
“And how did their paths intersect your own? Two washerwomen and the Marquess of Clarges?” Will asked, taking
another small bite of his meal. “You surely never had an occasion to become acquainted with them in your social circles,
considering their circumstances.”
Hannibal took a sip of his wine to clear his throat before saying, “I had no idea that Margot was in the Capital and had
never set eyes on Alana in my life. It happened one evening when I was leaving my practice, as a matter of fact. A grubby little
urchin ran me down and begged me to come with him as quickly as I could, saying that Miss Verger needed help and had sent
him for me. Miss Verger, he said, had been very insistent he tell me her name.”
Will frowned and put his silverware down, Hannibal’s serious tone warning him he would not like what was to come.
“Naturally, I was shocked to hear there was a member of the Hartford community in the Capital needing assistance, and as
a physician I could not ignore a plea for help,” Hannibal said, eyes narrowing as he recalled that night. He paused and leaned
across the table to touch Will’s hand. “If you would rather not hear—”
“I am committed to hearing all of it,” Will said, though he was nervous to know what would make Hannibal’s entire body
tense with mingled anger and horror. “This is very personal, Hannibal. Margot and Alana, will they resent you for telling me?”
“No,” Hannibal said, squeezing his fingers but not releasing him. “That is part of the reason why I went to Galley Field,
Will, to make assurances that the truth of what happened to them would be safe in your hands. You are a man of great
discretion whom I trust implicitly, and both Alana and Margot trust me implicitly.”
“That is very flattering, but—no, please continue,” Will said, grateful for the fingers twining in his own, strong and
comforting.
“I arrived to a furor,” Hannibal said, relaxing somewhat as he touched his spouse, drawing on his strength. “I found
Mason fleeing their room, drunk and bloody. He had beaten Margot nearly to the brink of death and had... most violently
abused them both in a sadistic attempt to realign their preferences.”
“Preferences?” Will asked in a harsh whisper, still fighting the disgust that filled him at the mention of such wanton,
vicious violence. Even without details, it was hard to shutter his Gift against it and his stomach rebelled against his
imagination. He could barely discern where his own reaction ended and Hannibal’s began, his husband was so deeply
disturbed.
“More specifically, their preference for one another,” Hannibal said, watching the realization dawn on Will’s face.
“Miss Bloom and Miss Verger are—”
“Yes,” Hannibal confirmed, breathing a sigh of relief to have that much out. “For all the years I have known them, they
have lived as if married. In Mason’s absence, they had expanded their friendship into love. When he returned, out of funds and
resources, he tracked them down in the hopes of drawing from Alana’s family on the pretext of earning their forgiveness. He
did not expect to find Alana and Margot were comfortably domestic without him. Brute that he is, he took exception.”
While not acquainted with the workings of a beta female body, Will was well acquainted enough with his own to know
what methods a monster like Mason Verger would use to assert himself over two women he felt offended him, and he bent
every bit of his formidable will against his helpless imagination.
Hannibal squeezed his hand again, a grounding force against his Gift, a paddle in the river of his raging imagination.

“He... abused them both equally,” Hannibal said, his emphasis making Will blanch and turn his face away, eyes closed and heart aching for them both. Alana, tricked into a marriage she did not want to a monster she could not escape. Margot, abused by a father and brother who should have loved her. Both of them found solace and love in each other's arms and the world saw fit to crush them as if their feelings and desires were irrelevant in a society which catered to men and their violent appetites. It filled Will's heart as much with aching sympathy as it did outrage on their behalf.

“Had the situation not been so dire, I would have been ill with it,” Hannibal admitted, smoothing his thumb over Will's knuckles, as much to soothe himself as Will. “I didn't have the luxury to indulge my disgust. Instead, I found myself having to decide whether to engage Mason and hold him liable for what he'd done or save his sister's life.”

“That is hardly a choice,” Will whispered, the words choked with distress.

“No, not by half,” Hannibal said. “I decided to tend to the Misses. I was not certain I would save Margot, but somehow I did. By the time she was stable, Mason was long gone. The constables refuse to maintain order in that section of the city and their neighbors were the sort who never involved themselves in the affairs of others.”

Will paled and quietly took a swallow of his wine, sickened by what little Hannibal had shared. He was not ignorant of the evils that men could visit on those around them and his knowledge only made it all the more appalling.

“That is... indescribably vile,” he whispered. “Thank you for keeping the details vague for my sake.”

“For my own as well as yours. It was a terrible sight I have no desire to revisit in any way,” Hannibal said. “They were so profoundly hurt they could not care for one another and had no one to turn to. I had them taken to a Cenobium and saw to their care until they were well enough to make the trip to Galley Field.”

Will absorbed that, nodding without realizing he had done so. He curled his fingers into Hannibal's and said, “That was a very kind thing to do, Hannibal, taking them away somewhere safe to be cared for. You could hardly save their lives and turn them out on the street.”

“I couldn't,” Hannibal said, heaving a heavy sigh. “Margot was born in Hartford. She is one of ours, even still.”

“That is why she sent the boy for you, insisting he tell you her name? Because she knew who you were, both as a man and as a physician?” Will realized. “She trusted you would help her, if only by virtue of your position?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said. “She was frightened, have no doubt about that. She was terrified of even the sight of me, but it was Alana she feared for, and she trusted that, as one who still numbered on the register of Hartford, I would fill my duty to her as her Lord and use my power to aid her.”

“A noble's solemn charge,” Will breathed, admiring the way Hannibal had not hesitated to fill the service expected of him. Margot had reached out to him as a supplicant to a Lord, invoking a promise that could not be broken, the ancient foundation of their class system.

“I promised them both I would protect them. I promised them they would remain safely under my care for as long as they needed,” Hannibal told him. “I was determined they would never face such terror again and I always keep my promises.”

“And so you became their benefactor,” Will murmured, so much of the gossip finding new meaning with this recounting. “Yet Mason remains free to this day? How is it that a man is free to enact such evil as he pleases and not be punished for it?”

“He ran away to save himself,” Hannibal said, simply and directly, only the tightening of his shoulders betraying his irritation. “Margot begged me to forget the entirety of it. She had no wish for the details to be made public, but I could not allow such a wrong to remain unpunished. I made arrangements to handle things discreetly and was informed Mason had fled to the Continent. I engaged a man by the name of Tier to keep track of his whereabouts and contented myself with the knowledge that he could not reach them where I sent them, leaving the rest in their hands.”

“Giving them your name to shield them,” Will said, drawing a deep breath, all he had learned settling deep into his mind. “And your daughter? She came after you first took up with Miss Bloom.”

“Yes, Marissa, my daughter,” Hannibal said, rubbing his forehead with a small wince. “Alana and Margot lived quietly at Galley Field without incident, but that is where I have always spent my free time away from the Capital. When the Season ended, I retired to the country and joined them.”
And the rumors regarding Alana began, of course,” Will said, recalling all too clearly the society column announcing that Lord Clarges had taken to the country with a mysterious, dark-haired female. The negotiations for the rail had started that day, and how passionately he had argued his case, fueled by the knowledge his husband’s name was linked with yet another woman.

A woman who had never been his mistress.

It made him doubt everything he had heard in the past six years.

“There was no avoiding the rumors,” Hannibal said, searching Will’s expression and finding nothing more than thoughtful contemplation, “once it quickly became apparent that Alana was pregnant. Far too quickly, in fact.”

“Gods, she’s Mason’s daughter,” Will said, exhaling with astonishment. He could hear his father’s voice, his harsh, barking laughter, could feel his disbelief and disdain, mocking Will’s easy trust in the truth of Hannibal’s words.

But he could feel no lie from Hannibal, could feel nothing but the bitterness of what had happened to two women alone in the world at the mercy of a heartless man.

He lifted his gaze to Hannibal’s and said with more strength, “The little girl, your daughter, she is Mason’s child.”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, simple and direct. “In terms of paternity, she is Mason’s daughter, though we hope she will never need to know such a thing. Allowing the world to believe Marissa was my daughter created that much more distance between the Misses and Mason.”

“And you had no thought to... to what I might think?” Will asked, though he knew he was rubbing a lemon on his own cut with that question.

“At the time, when I thought of you, I thought of the Omega who had wheedled my birthright out of my grandfather in less than two days,” Hannibal said, his features taut and tight. “You know all too well how unforgiving—and unforgivable—I was. You know I would change it all if I could, Will.”

Will thought he might let go of Hannibal’s hand, but he didn’t. He held fast, instead, clinging to the man before him to erase the man he’d been.

“And here is where I confess more of the things that shame me,” Hannibal quietly began. “I know you are aware of my activities when I first returned to the Capital.”

“Yes,” Will said, eyes shuttered, his form in still repose but expectant, waiting. “You took a mistress the moment you arrived.”

“I did,” Hannibal said, a dark flush on his cheeks. “I was deprived of such company in my years away at war and I sought comforts that had been denied to me. I was... disappointed in the result and understood then why I did not suffer for its absence while away at war. I do not say it to offer an excuse, Will, merely to be honest.”

Will frowned. “Failing your expectations, you endeavored to try and try again?”

Hannibal subsided, chastened, and said, “No, Will. I realize it may come as something of a shock, considering all you have heard, but the result of my disappointment was to confirm I have never been particularly interested in carnal pursuits.”

“If even so moral a person such as I must have other appetites, Hannibal,” Will reminded him, recalling their conversation, “then surely that must apply to an Alpha of your lineage.”

“I spent ten years at war without options that appealed to me, Will,” Hannibal said. “And it was no great hardship. I have been seen in the company of many women, yes, but for a purpose, and it was not that. If a woman spent the night untouched in my bed, that was certainly not the story she told her friends.”

Will angled a flat look at him and almost did withdraw his hand, then. “Are you attempting to tell me that you slept in the same bed as a woman and did not take advantage?”

“The best way to avoid a person bent on becoming my lover is to seem otherwise engaged. I will not lie to you and say that I have always been entirely chaste since my return, as there were a few rare occasions when I acted impulsively,” Hannibal said, holding Will’s gaze despite his discomfort in speaking so plainly to his husband. “But those were rare occasions, indeed. Nothing like the gossips insist. Anatomy is... a tricky business for Alphas.”

Hannibal expected Will to blush.

He didn’t.

“You do not seem all that indifferent to me, Lord Clarges,” Will said, testing his bond to Hannibal but finding no lie.
“I think perhaps it is because my tastes lie elsewhere,” Hannibal said, and that brought a blush to Will’s cheeks. “Alana came to my rescue. Once the world believed that she was my favorite, I was content to remain unbothered by the nuisance of those who wished to better make my acquaintance through an absence of clothing.”

“Hannibal!” Will said, appalled by his phrasing, eyes flying wide.

“I apologize,” Hannibal said, clearing his throat. “I did not mean to offend you.”

Will gave him a warning look from beneath the long curl of his lashes, but it soon became meditative and considering. “They saved you from the inconvenience of would-be mistresses and the husband you despised, and you gave them a home and the protection of your position.”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, fondling the fine fingers in his grasp, seeking what comfort Will would grant him.

“You did not go to Galley Field simply to beg their blessing to tell me this story, Hannibal,” Will said, cocking his head in question. “And even I know that you cannot keep them where they are and hope to still the rumors that she is your mistress—and I will have those rumors stilled, Hannibal. I am not prone vanity, but I will not have those in your acquaintance think so little of me, as that man at Fernhill does.”

“Thomas Marlow is a fool who exaggerates everything he hears,” Hannibal said, annoyed by even the thought of him. “Of course I would not disrespect you, Will. The Misses are taking a cottage near the seaside attached to a garrison where a friend of mine will look after them and see to their safety. He is a Captain there and has the manpower to keep them safe.”

Will nodded, a soft exhale of relief escaping him. “The details you settled?”

“I wanted to assure them that I would not abandon them to their own resources as far as income. The cost of their care comes from my personal accounts and will not diminish what is yours,” Hannibal said, adding with a smile, “Though I know you would never begrudge them.”

“No, I hadn’t even considered such,” Will admitted, and fixed Hannibal with a weighty stare. “You will treat me as your equal? As your spouse?”

“I have put all else aside,” Hannibal confirmed. “I will have no company but yours, Will, and need no other to content me. I have made arrangements for those who depend on me and I have returned to you with the intentions of dedicating myself to your happiness.”

“But what of the babe she carries now?” Will asked, confusion wrinkling his brow, doubt threatening to rise to the surface. “To whom does he belong?”

“They offered to tell me, but I felt it was no business of mine,” Hannibal said, shifting with discomfit at what he knew was to come. “I do not know, but he is not mine.”

“But you intended him to be,” Will softly said, his blue eyes meeting Hannibal’s. “Didn’t you?”

Hannibal swallowed hard, his tongue touching his lower lip, the tips of his heavy Alpha fangs bared in a soft frown of distaste. His nod was barely discernible, but it was a nod nonetheless.

The implications of it struck Will with force. He looked at Hannibal, gazed at him with understanding shining in his vivid blue eyes, and said with quiet distance, “You would rather name a stranger’s child as your heir than any child of mine...”

‘I don’t want one from you... I cannot, in fact, think of anything I want less...’

The memory of those words hung between them, and Will pulled away, retreating into his stiff reserve to analyze the ache that pushed through him, that sought to rend the small thread of hope which had sprung up between them.

“There was a time, yes, when I had intended to use that child to satisfy my grandfather, with the full understanding on all sides that I would make my own arrangements for allocating the inheritance once he had passed,” Hannibal said, hoping his words would keep his spouse near him. “I have made decisions over the past six years that, looking back on them now, appall me to my very core.”

He surged to his feet and moved around the table to crouch at Will’s side, imploring, “Knowing you now as I do, I would never take such rash and unforgivable actions! I would never allow myself to behave in such a shameful fashion or with such a gross display of selfish arrogance! I admit it and will always claim the return for my folly. You deserve to know the truth of things.”

“For what reason?” Will asked, keeping himself under tight control but looking down into his husband’s face, so beautiful that a lesser man might forgive him anything if only to win his smile.
But Will was not a man, nor a woman. He was only himself, and it would take more than Hannibal's aristocratic features to do him in.

“Because I meant everything that I said to you, Will,” Hannibal said, his amber eyes bright with passion. “Because I would, with your permission, wish to remain at Hartford House and be your husband in more than name.”

Will just gazed at him, silent and safe behind the locked doors of his defenses. Even as Hannibal knelt before him, he could feel Will moving steadily deeper into the fortress he had built to protect himself.

“I would bring our shattered potential together, as I promised,” Hannibal said, eyes fierce with the force of his conviction. “I should like to be your husband, Will. In truth.”

“Truth,” Will breathed, the word escaping him in his upset. “Six years and a scheme to deceive your grandfather, and now you wish to be my husband in truth? You cannot simply change your mind, Lord Clarges! Life doesn't work that way!”

“What if I have?” Hannibal asked, noting the hot color that flooded Will's cheeks. “What if life did, in fact, work that way? What would you change your mind about, Will?”

Will's mouth parted. He fell into bewildered silence, the question hurtling him backwards through his life to find a decision he would change.

The realization of what he found there drained the anger right out of him. Fragile and worn, he said with all the stiff dignity he could muster, “You're right, of course, Lord Clarges. I have always depended on the Alphas in my life to make my decisions. There is nothing I would change my mind about because I have never been given the autonomy to decide in the first place. Why should this be any different? Why should there be any consequences for you having abandoned me for six years without a backwards glance and plotted to set a child who isn't even yours as your heir rather than one born from 'a construct of meager appeal housing a vapid, empty mind and lack of true purpose outside of getting bedded’?”

“There are consequences, Will,” Hannibal said, flinching from the harshness of his own words, said with such hateful conviction at the time. He made an abortive movement to touch him but remembered himself and dropped his hand. “There have been consequences and unfortunately we both have to live with them. It is not fair—”

“When is life ever fair?”

Will glared at him, trembling with rage.

“The fact of the matter is that you do have a choice, and I will never take that from you,” Hannibal said, squaring his shoulders, determined to be heard. “When I think of the actions I took and the spite with which I took them, I am ashamed, Will. Yet I will confess it all to gain your trust and flood you with apologies. You know I regret what I have done, Will. My words to you at Hartford were not a lie. The tears I shed before you were honest. I meant every word I said to you, I swear it.”

He shifted up to stand at Will's side, his amber eyes filled with emotion, pleading.

“I am flawed, Will. I am a prideful man, and arrogant, and I think too well of myself most times to think very well of others,” Hannibal said, struggling to control his emotions. “But if you will have me, unworthy as I am in so many respects, I promise that you will never regret it, and perhaps we can find together what we have missed in one another.”

“What if I refuse you?” Will murmured, turning his head away to give Hannibal his profile, perfect and lovely with his snub of a nose and his stubborn chin and every exquisite detail stamped on Hannibal's heart as surely as it was in his memory.

“Your statement implies there is another option, Lord Clarges. Tell me what it is.”

“The other option is what it has always been,” Hannibal said, unable to keep the soft thread of displeasure out of his voice. “To give my grandfather an heir and part ways to our respective lives—mine in the Capital, and yours at Hartford House. To be strangers to one another again. The Lecter line must continue, and I can say with utter honesty that I will have no children elsewhere.”

Will lowered his head, amazed to find that it hurt so much to consider losing his husband for good and all.

“I would leave you, if you so wished, to raise the child without knowing me... though it would pain me terribly to do so.”

Will took a deep breath, struggling against what he'd been told.

“The things I said to you, the beliefs I held—I haven’t changed my mind, Will. You have changed it for me,” Hannibal said, desperate to reach him. “Do you still see the man I was in the man who stands before you?”
Will looked up at him with those wounded, unyielding eyes, his back ramrod straight and his shoulders squared, for all the world as if he might reach for the nearest heavy object and fling it at Hannibal's head.

Hannibal was entirely certain he deserved it, should Will decide to do so.

“You turned a mirror on my heart and made me see the ugliness it held,” Hannibal said, and knelt again, daring to touch Will’s soft cheek, the barest brush of callused fingertips in a caress that lifted goosebumps with its tenderness. Hannibal's voice was soft and sincere when he confessed, “You have given me something far more beautiful to take its place, and it has found a home there.”

Will could feel the sincerity coming from him, the painful ache of hope that expected to be denied. How well he knew that feeling, bitter to its depths, a self-inflicted wound humans were infatuated with causing themselves.

“The future,” Hannibal said, wetting his dry lips, a tremble coursing through him when he thought of how much hinged on this moment, “is and will always be yours to choose.”

Will considered the man before him. The same man who had treated him so terribly in the beginning, the same man who had snubbed him and ignored him and abandoned him.

He was also the same man who so tenderly kissed his scars, who had flown into a rage when he'd been hurt, who had openly condemned his father for the way he'd been treated.

A man who had carried him without complaint, confessed his regrets for abandoning Will to gossip and conjecture, who had dressed him in his nightshirt and knelt before him with warmth in his upturned eyes.

This was the same man who had wept before him, unguarded and repentant, who had admitted to his wrongs and owned his mistakes, who kissed his hand and insisted he was beautiful even when he wasn’t, if only to make him smile.

Will asked himself if he was willing to be the one who would turn his back on their potential this time. If he would, for the sake of his pride, turn Hannibal away for another six years and take cold comfort in knowing that he might have hurt Hannibal as much as he’d been hurt so long ago.

Or if, instead, he was capable of finding room in his heart to forgive what his husband had done in his misguided, self-righteous cruelty and seek the happiness Hannibal hoped to return in excess of his expectations. The very same happiness life had always denied him and Hannibal would defy the gods themselves to have, if it suited him.

Will reached out and lay his hand against his husband's cheek, his heart skipping when Hannibal leaned into his touch, capturing his hand as if he feared Will might pull away.

“When I was a little boy, I would go down to the riverside alone,” Will said, fixing his gaze on the silver box that reflected the golden candlelight, his thumb smoothing over Hannibal's high cheekbone. “I would pick flowers along the way, one for every painful thought, one for every angry response I could never give, one for each frustration.”

Hannibal said nothing, but his breathing shallowed in an attempt to keep his heart from pounding with hope.

“I would take those flowers and wade into the river,” Will said, blinking rapidly against remembered emotion. “One by one I would put them in the current and watch the river take them away. I used to wish I could be taken away, as they were. Pulled from my life by the eddying current into the unknown.”

He looked at Hannibal, soft and reflective but firm.

“I have let go of things that you cannot imagine,” Will told him, his tight smile somber and haunted. “Somehow, I’ve always managed to keep myself, even if the damage remains. It will always remain, Hannibal.”

Hannibal dropped his gaze, mouth tightening with pain.

“Some things are simply beyond repair...” Will said.

Hannibal steeled himself to accept it, his disappointment already so vast he was not entirely certain he would be able to bear it, though he knew he would stay to ensure Will’s safety from the threat that seemed so determined to end him.

“Our scars are the reflection of a life lived, a map of ourselves etched into flesh and soul,” Hannibal said, his voice soft and pitched low, yet it was still a struggle to raise his eyes to meet Will’s, to see the wounds he'd left reflected back at him—an ugly pattern of his own design.

“I am more than a sum of my scars,” Will said, steady and firm. In a somber, slow cadence, he softly said, “What you have done for the Misses Bloom and Verger is commendable, Hannibal. Please, do not think from my reactions that I find any fault whatsoever in the actions you took, except as they pertain to myself.”
The fingers resting on Hannibal's cheek tightened but did not withdraw.

“It was not easy hearing of your exploits for the past six years. Knowing they were exaggerated, hearing you readily admit that you regret the actions you took... it dampens my pain and anger somewhat,” Will said. He held Hannibal's gaze, his own unflinching but still welling with the melancholy Hannibal had sworn to never see again. “You said you would try with everything in you to bring it back together again. You said if it took the rest of your life, you would never stop trying.”

“I did,” Hannibal said, hardly daring to take a breath. “I promise you that I meant every word, Will.”

“We must always strive to overcome that which seeks to deprive us of what little joy the world so grudgingly gives,” Will said, and took a deep breath before letting it out again. “If I am to decide the future for us both, Hannibal, then I suppose I should allow you to try your hardest to show me why I should decide in your favor.”

The surprised pleasure that filled Hannibal's uplifted eyes only amplified the vibration of happiness and hope that Will felt through his bond.

“I would like to begin anew, Hannibal, in the hopes that friendship can provide what force and circumstance could not,” Will told him, certain that Hannibal would not refuse him, not now. “I cannot promise I can forgive you just yet... but like you, I can promise I will try.”

Hannibal's smile was soft and hesitant, and his voice was just the tiniest bit unsteady when he whispered, “I should like that very much, Will. I promise you that you shall not regret this.”

He turned his mouth against Will's hand and kissed his palm, prepared to be reprimanded, but pleased when he was not. Hannibal's earnest amber eyes met his, and Will's solemn expression gave way to the slightest of smiles when Hannibal solemnly swore, “And I always keep my promises.”

Chapter 26

They remained there in the library, dessert exchanged for after-dinner brandies while the candles burned low. There were endless subjects to broach, tastes to explore, opinions to be sought, but their conversation only skimmed the surface. They were cautious of giving offense, treading gingerly past things which felt too sharp after the revelations of the day.

Hannibal told Will of the school he was sponsoring, finding it was a topic they could share without reservation. He was pleased to inform his mate that its charter would in fact now include Omegas. It made Will flush with pleasure and made Hannibal even more determined that he should only see Will's delighted smile from now on.

It was much later than Will was used to when he was finally escorted to his room, his hand once more asked after, his permission given again. There was a difference now in the way it touched him, the press of soft lips against his skin. There was no barrier between them, no understanding of another whose place he might be occupying for a moment's convenience.

There was only potential, ripe and incomplete yet there all the same, building a warmth that seemed to chase back the lurking threat of Will's heat in a confusing contradiction.

As he dressed late the next morning with Jimmy's expert assistance, he ventured, "Jimmy, can I ask you something somewhat... intimate?"

“Naturally,” Jimmy said, never pausing in his work, but flashing Will a curious glance. "I'm here to help.”

Will hesitated, framing his thoughts carefully before he asked, “Is it possible for an Alpha to suppress an Omega's heat?”

Jimmy did pause then, but only for a moment.

“I've heard of it happening between bonded pairs,” he said, rapidly buttoning Will's shirt, “but only if it was a false heat, like one stress-generated or triggered by another Alpha. I've noticed you've been a bit flushed. Are you worried it's ahead of time?”

Will nodded, holding his arms out for Jimmy to get his cuffs.

“Well, you've been under quite a lot of stress recently,” Jimmy mused, “and I'm sure it doesn't help to have that frightful beast Dolarhyde quite literally breathing down your neck.”

“I keep getting feverish,” Will said, brow wrinkling in concern. “I worried that Hannibal was making it worse, but it fades around him. Do you suppose we're... incompatible?”
“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” Jimmy tutted, shaking out his waistcoat and helping Will slide it on. “If I can be blunt with you, I think it’s because you are compatible. Bonded pairs are known to settle their mates into their natural rhythm. I realize you haven’t bonded yet, but considering how much time you spend with him, it’s very likely you’re syncing up with his... well, sorry for the crude term, but his rut. He’s not been around an Omega in years, so he’s probably gearing up for one.”

Will’s eyes rounded. “I hadn’t considered that.”

“You haven’t had much exposure to an Alpha with his pedigree and His Grace wouldn’t hit all the same reactions for you that your husband does,” Jimmy reminded him, easing Will’s jacket on. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about, my Lord. If it is the way I think, then the closer you are to your husband, the better chance you have to stave it off for a bit, at least until the two of you get to know one another somewhat better and fall into a rhythm.”

There was a quiet knock at his door and Jimmy went to answer it, leaving Will to consider what he’d been told.

“If it’s Francis, tell him I should like to take a walk,” Will called, smoothing his jacket and checking his buttons. “My head is fuzzy this morning. I think I need some fresh air.”

“Oh, my! No, my Lord, this is much more welcome than Mr. Dolarhyde,” Jimmy said, his tone getting Will’s attention.

He turned around to find his valet bearing a huge bouquet of fresh flowers in a cut-crystal vase, his beaming smile barely visible past the thick display.

“Shall I read the note?” Jimmy asked, his teasing smile becoming a grin.

Will took the note from him before he could and leaned close to breathe in the floral perfume. It was a very pleasant way to start his day and he was smiling as he drew back to read the note, letting Jimmy fuss with the flowers.

*I hope the morning finds you well, and inclined to have my company.*

*Yours,*

*Hannibal*

“Should I place these here or on your vanity? I wonder if the sun will wilt them?” Jimmy asked, puttering about the room to find the perfect place for the bouquet.

“Take it downstairs to the foyer, please, Jimmy,” Will suggested, clearing his throat to firm his voice. “Leaving them here where they cannot be seen seems wasteful.”

“Certainly, my Lord!” Jimmy said, hastening to do as he was told.

Will took advantage of his absence to go to his jewelry box and pry the lining up. Inside, in the space that had previously hidden his unpleasant letter, lay the note that Hannibal had written him last night. Will felt entirely foolish placing this new note within, but he was loathe to part with them.

'*For comfort when you’re alone again...’*

He tossed his head against that thought and put the lining to rights, ensuring he left no trace that would lead to their discovery. He caught sight of himself in the mirror and paused, looking with a critical eye at how he was dressed. His new clothing fit like a glove, the expert tailoring accentuating his firm figure, the deep colors a rich complement to his complexion and dark curls. He stared at his reflection briefly, smoothing his patterned waistcoat, breathing out the odd tingle of anxiety that threatened. He knew he should not indulge in such useless vanity, that a young man must not make a spectacle of himself with color and cut, that he must at all times be serious and attentive to his work and not distracted by frivolous thing, but it was difficult to remain disciplined under such circumstances.

“You are not an Omega, Will Graham,” he whispered, steadying himself with the reminder. “You are not a man, nor a woman. You are only yourself and that is all you need to be.”

The familiar words settled him, but there was no drowning out his nervous anticipation, because Hannibal had made his intentions very clear last night.

His husband was going to court him. He was going to apply every bit of his formidable power to wooing Will in an effort to reconcile, which made the possibility of his next heat take on all sorts of new dimensions.

It was simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating.

Will smoothed his curls and turned away from the mirror with a resolute nod, reminding himself that he had nothing to be vain about and no reason at all to feel concerned about his looks, no matter what fanciful imaginings his husband expressed.

‘*If you will not stand to hear me call you beautiful, then I will kiss you every time I think to say it...’*
“Nonsense,” Will breathed, but a half-suppressed smile teased his lips. He moved out to the landing with an eagerness he was afraid to examine too closely. He noted with some surprise that Francis was not there, nor was there any trace of his wood smoke and leather scent.

Curious but reticent, Will headed downstairs with his wide eyes sweeping, searching for a servant who could point him in Hannibal’s direction.

It was Hannibal himself who called to him, striding in through the front door in a waft of his familiar, rich scent. There was a lively sparkle in his amber eyes that teased a smile to Will’s full lips.

“No breakfast this morning, Lord Clarges?”

“I wouldn’t dream of starving you,” Hannibal said with a slight smile, and raised his hand ever so slightly towards Will’s.

“May I say good morning?”

“You do seem very pleased with yourself for some reason,” Will said, feeling heat in his cheeks when Hannibal’s warm fingers slid beneath his own and tightened, strong and firm. His hand was swept up and delivered to Hannibal’s lips for a kiss. The soft press of his mouth on Will’s hand was brief, gentle, but the warmth of his breath lingered even after he raised his head.

“You seem to be pleased with yourself one way or another,” Hannibal reminded him, taking heart by how approachable his spouse seemed. “But I do have quite a lot to be pleased about, don’t I? It’s a beautiful morning, we have eluded harm at Hartford House, and I have the prospect of spending the day with my beautiful spouse, whom I can kiss without being coshed for it.”

“You hope you won’t be coshed for it.” Will’s mouth twitched and he summoned a wry look that made no dent in Hannibal’s infectious good spirits, merely compelled his hand to be kissed again. “Thank you very much for the bouquet. The flowers are lovely.”

“I thought you would enjoy them. Marsham can feel so gloomy at times,” Hannibal said, casting a meaningful glance around the foyer where the flowers were on display, Will’s hand held lightly in his fingers. “Bringing the outdoors within does brighten things some.”

“I have some thoughts on that subject, coincidentally,” Will told him, shifting to see over Hannibal’s shoulder, wondering why the door was still open. He could see the shadows of people out on the cobblestone drive but could not fathom what was happening.

“You were saying you had some thoughts on Marsham Heath,” Hannibal urged him, moving to block his view. “I hope you don’t find our modest little estate terribly shabby.”

“No, of course not. It’s lovely,” Will answered, annoyed to be so stymied by his husband. “It’s very comforting here.”

“But not precisely comfortable, however,” Hannibal said, shifting again when Will did, blatantly preventing Will from seeing outside. “It lacks amenities. I can’t imagine Grandfather has been here in twenty years; we’ve neglected it.”

“I have met with Mr. Wells and drawn up plans,” Will informed him, subsiding with an exasperated frown. “The particulars are upstairs in my room, but we plan to have the house plumbed. If the numbers fall right, we might be able to line it for gas, should that eventually catch on out here.”

Hannibal’s brows rose at that. “You certainly waste no time.”

“It is important to be useful and I wished to be distracted yesterday, considering my husband had bolted off to Galley Field,” Will said, giving Hannibal a sharp, wry look. “You might have said why you were going.”

“There were far too many things for you to slap me with,” Hannibal pointed out, brushing his thumb over Will’s knuckles. “Considering you have flung a table at me, I was understandably leery of there being an entire service-worth of plates, candlesticks, chairs at your disposal. I didn’t dare divert you when you were making so impressive an exit. You are, indeed, a dangerous person, Will.”

“Don’t you soon forget it,” Will said, satisfied enough to stop needling his husband. The harsh feelings of last night were softer this morning, present but muted, and he was content to leave them where they lay.
“That would never happen,” Hannibal promised. “Now, should you like to pester Thatch for a late breakfast? Or would you prefer to know why I was outside?”

Will cocked an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth curling up and his lungs filling with a deep, calming breath, as if his entire body was greedy for the scent of his bonded Alpha. “Why were you outside?”

“I was hoping,” Hannibal said, his amber eyes earnest and bright, “you might teach me to fish.”

“I shouldn’t teach you anything, after the way you’ve behaved,” Will said, smirking at how crestfallen Hannibal seemed before he realized Will was teasing. His voice held a gentle note of affection when he said, “I haven’t brought my gear, Hannibal.”

“I brought it,” Hannibal said, puffed up as a peacock and preening with pride. It was impossible to resist such pompous, self-congratulatory posturing, and Will smothered a laugh, amused. “Thank you, Hannibal, that was very thoughtful of you. Shall we ‘laze about eating’ as well?”

“I expect I will insist on it,” Hannibal said, grinning. “As a matter of fact, Thatch is getting everything ready for us.”

“Is that what’s going on?” Will asked, surprised and pleased. He found himself looking forward to a day alone with his husband. No work, no worries, no one with murderous intentions. Only fresh air, new places, and the prospect of a few hours spent casting lines and relaxing.

He looked over at Hannibal when his hand was raised again, and blinked when his husband paused in the act of kissing him to ask at the last second, “May I?”

Will gave an almost imperceptible nod, charmed despite himself but still mystified by Hannibal’s actions. “For your beautiful smile,” he said, in answer to the question so obvious in Will’s big blue eyes, and kissed his hand again for good measure. “And for the hope that I see more of it.”

Will’s anticipation suffered a blow when he and Hannibal went outside and only one of the horses was saddled. The other was loaded with his fishing gear and a basket lunch and clearly had no spot for him to ride.

“Unless you are sending me off alone,” Will said, bemused, “we shall need another horse.”

“Considering the residual effects of your concussion,” Hannibal countered, moving to check his horse’s saddle straps, taking no risks with his mate’s safety, “I felt it would be safer to ride double, and we won’t be going terribly far.”

“Then I should be safe enough on my own horse,” Will said, considering the two of them doubling up on Hannibal’s horse and finding his cheeks blooming pink.

“Nonsense, you might fall,” Hannibal said, patting the saddle. He looked altogether too pleased with himself again, Will noted. “Up you go.”

After a long, considering silence, Will mounted with grace and settled, reluctantly noting how it felt like he was moving even after he was seated.

Hannibal was up in a heartbeat, easily sliding into the saddle as he lifted Will up onto his thighs, one arm curving around Will’s waist to hold him fast, his other hand taking up the reins.

“Walk on.”

The horse lolled into motion and Will drew a breath, his lids drooping to half cover his eyes in the gusting late morning air. The strong sunlight faded beneath the heavy canopy of the forest, the scent of pine and fresh green growth somehow only enhancing Hannibal’s Alpha scent. The easy movement of the horse lulled him to relax and Will became more aware of his husband. There was something comforting in the heat of the strong arms around him, a kind of relief in the powerful body behind his, the pressure of Hannibal’s corded arm at his waist, the steady thunder of his heart pressed to Will’s back. There was no tension in him, just warmth and strength that enfolded Will in him, enveloped but not undone, not lessened, merely... safe. It made the cliff seem far less frightening a specter, chased away by the busy chattering of wildlife and his husband’s protective presence.

Hannibal felt Will uncoil by slow degrees, his slender body finally giving with the motion of the horse as they took a deer trail through the woods into the deeper forest. He was warm enough Hannibal suspected a fever, but he didn’t have any signs
of illness other than the residual effects from his fall. He resolved to keep a close eye on him, though the intention got lost somewhere in Will’s soft scent when he leaned back and his wind-tossed curls tickled Hannibal’s nose.

“Are we avoiding the town to maintain the illusion of secrecy?” Will asked, skin prickling with awareness of Hannibal’s subtle snuffling at his curls. “Or shall we call on the Crawfords very soon?”

“Word travels quickly,” Hannibal said, resisting the lure of those curls with difficulty. “Grandfather’s coach is easily recognized and our movements cannot remain private for long; it wouldn’t hurt anything to leave a card with the Crawfords to be polite. Jack has done a fine job accommodating my requests for your safety.”

He felt Will tense a little, and murmured, “You haven’t any cards.”

“I’ve never needed them,” Will said, defensive but firm. “Mina had some made up for me before I left father’s house...” he trailed off, embarrassed. “I put them away when I realized I wouldn’t use them.”

Hannibal gave Will’s side a soothing caress and squeezed him a bit to reassure him.

“I will order replacements for you,” he said, smiling when Will sent a searching glance back at him, his blue eyes still shaded with the remnants of his concussion and the weight of their past. “You will need them, Will, believe me.”

Just that one caress was all he dared, but even that left Hannibal dangerously shaken. It was terrifying to realize how fragile their peace was, how delicate he should have always been. It was a wonder he hadn’t entirely broken Will’s ability to trust him before now, shattered against his arrogant assumptions like that unfortunate teacup.

He thanked his lucky starts that hope was less fragile than he feared and cradled his thoughtful mate, whose thick lashes fluttered becomingly as he faced ahead.

“What else did you manage to do in my absence yesterday?” Hannibal inquired, coaxing him into conversation. His hot breath spilled against Will’s ear, distracting and tickling.

“Not terribly much aside from planning with Mr. Wells, though I did have the strangest encounter afterwards,” Will said, lifting his face to the breeze to quell his warmth. It seemed to permeate him in Hannibal’s presence, a prickling awareness that was not his heat, as he had feared, but something potentially more dangerous.

“What sort of strange encounter?” Hannibal asked, turning the horses onto a wider trail once they were deeper into the woods.

“I had gone for a walk,” Will said, the memory making him shiver. Hannibal’s hand spread against his rib cage in response, fingers cupped against the curve of his side. “Francis was with me, of course. We ran into a man on the trail.”

“That is quite a happenstance,” Hannibal said, concerned. He shifted Will just slightly in his lap, brow wrinkling. “Considering how large the surrounding forests are, you could go for a dozen walks and never meet a soul. Who was he? Did he know you?”

“No, no, he’s a local,” Will said, hastening to assure him. “His daughter works at the house. He seemed... very odd. His name is Hobbs.”

“Hobbs? I am not familiar with any Hobbs family in the area,” Hannibal mused, wracking his formidable memory for any tidbit it might offer.

“He was poaching,” Will said. “He tried to claim he was the gamekeeper, but Mr. Wells had informed me Marsham Heath does not employ one.”

“Not since my great-grandfather’s time. It proved impossible to regulate these forests and there was enough game for everyone,” Hannibal said, ducking to avoid a low-hanging branch. It pressed him momentarily over Will’s back and his little mate huffed with indignation.

“Grandfather felt it was unnecessary to have a gamekeeper,” Hannibal said, straightening as soon as he was able, though with reluctance. “You sound unsettled. Did he agitate you?”

“No, no, he’s a local,” Will said, hastening to assure him. “His daughter works at the house. He seemed... very odd. His name is Hobbs.”

“Hobbs? I am not familiar with any Hobbs family in the area,” Hannibal mused, wracking his formidable memory for any tidbit it might offer.

“He was poaching.” Hannibal said. “He tried to claim he was the gamekeeper, but Mr. Wells had informed me Marsham Heath does not employ one.”

“No one is above suspicion, Will,” Hannibal reminded him.
“No, but Francis wasn’t even near when my saddle was cut!”

“That you know of,” Hannibal pointed out, bringing Will to reflective silence. “I was not able to tell you before, due to our abrupt parting, but Francis is a dangerous man, Will. He was in the Navy and nearly killed a man who insulted him. He was dismissed from service and spent time in prison before your sister took him in.”

Will wet his lips and breathed, “That is... unnerving to say the least. One can never be entirely certain of another’s intentions, but I do not feel that Francis is particularly dangerous to me. He has known me since childhood and is sincere in his desire to protect me. You only have one version of the truth and I would prefer to hear his side of things, in all fairness.”

“I wouldn’t presume to question your judgment, Will, as it is only your decision who to keep near you, but I reserve the right to be suspicious of him,” Hannibal said. “I would have thought you of all people would know where he was off to. He didn’t ask your permission?”

Will shook his head, absorbed in looking around at the wooded trail, spying a ruckus of squirrels ahead, squabbling over a treat. He realized Hannibal was silent, thoughtful with worry. He leaned forward enough to look back at his husband and said, “Francis is my sister's servant, in the end, and must do as she bids him for the sake of his own peace... and he does not need to shadow me in your presence, considering I am safe with you.”

Hannibal’s pleasure poured through his bond and Will smiled in response, putting Francis as well as Hobbs and his strange behavior to the back of his mind.

They rode through the deep forest until the trees began to thin. Hannibal wished they could ride forever, an eternity of him cradling Will’s warm, relaxed body in his arms. It was heartening to see him so content, so free of his cares and untroubled. Yet the distant sound of water called and the noise of it woke Hannibal's anxiety slowly, like fingers teasing loose a knot, relentless and gradual.

Will sensed his husband’s growing unease, but did not prod at it. It touched him that Hannibal would go to such lengths for the sake of his enjoyment when coming to such a place so clearly bothered him and with such good reason—Mischa, the storm, and the accident that had stolen his family.

Hearing it from Bedelia had given Will the facts, but Hannibal had lived it, and now he guided them closer to the very river where his family had died, taken by the senseless violence Nature was so greatly-equipped to visit on those with so few defenses.

Will’s hand settled on Hannibal’s where it was pressed to his side and he curled his fingers over his husband’s. He stayed silent, wondering if he should broach the subject of Hannibal's loss and admit what Bedelia had told him.

“The mills are upstream,” Hannibal said, rallying when he imagined how much Will would enjoy some time at his hobby. He turned the horse up the trail, widened by men and beasts alike. “Do you see them?”

“Yes,” Will said, his fingers tightening on his husband, at his hand and at his thigh where Will was not even aware of touching him.

The mills loomed beyond the sunlight-dappled haze of the trail, stained with brilliant green moss and darkened with age. There was something hushed and reverent about them in Will’s eyes, the massive wheels fallen from their axes, places of busy industry now left to crumble and be reclaimed by the river.

Staring as they emerged from the treeline, Will asked, “They have been entirely abandoned?”

“For the most part, yes,” Hannibal said, his anxiety fading into warmth at Will’s touch, the pleasant timbre of his voice, the nearness of him. “There should be one or two docks yet sound enough to fish from.”

Will sensed the shift in him and smiled, hoping that Hannibal could enjoy himself and perhaps his ugly memories of this river could be overshadowed by new ones. By memories they could make together.

They rode towards the least time-worn mill and dismounted, working in companionable silence to unload the horses and hobble them near the water in the shade of an overhanging tree.

“Now, I have no idea how any of this goes together,” Hannibal said, loading himself up with Will’s gear and testing the dock with his weight to be sure it would hold. “So you'll have your hands full teaching me.”

“The first rule of fishing is to be comfortable,” Will said, unbuttoning his jacket and shrugging it off, scolding, “Please don’t stare at me, Lord Clarges.”
Hannibal grinned, encumbered by gear as he was, and said, “I can hardly help it. You look perfectly elemental, Will. This truly is where you are happiest, isn’t it?”

“IT IS,” Will admitted, draping his jacket over a low-lying tree branch and tugging off his boots to put his stockings within. He collected the gear from Hannibal with ease, suggesting, “You should follow my lead. Hot and uncomfortable is no way to spend your morning.”

Hannibal watched him move eagerly out onto the dock, the tuck of his waistcoat emphasizing his trim waist and slim hips. He was distracted enough by the sight that Will had to scold him again, urging him to come along.

Will already had one of the poles together when Hannibal reached him, and grinned up at him with a brilliance that rivaled the sun, his blue eyes squinting against the light and his little, modest Omegan fangs actually showing for a change.

“I feel rather rebellious out in the daylight half undressed,” Hannibal said, sitting down next to Will at the end of the dock, bare feet dangling over the water rushing below. “In spring we could dip our feet.”

“The dock at Hartford is low enough to do so,” Will said, handing him the pole to put the other together. “Though it floods in the spring.”

Hannibal inspected the pole, watching Will work so effortlessly with the efficient movements of long practice. He leaned over to look at the water and surreptitiously looked his fill at Will’s long feet and trim ankles, admiring his perfect little toes and the fine length of them. Even sitting his feet turned in a little, which was vastly adorable.

“Stop that,” Will said, attempting to tuck his feet back out of sight beneath the dock.

“I was looking at the water,” Hannibal said, lying and knowing that Will knew it, but instead of chastisement he got a wry smile. “Now, what on earth do we do?”

Will showed him how to bait his hook, laughing at Hannibal’s wrinkled nose and moue of distaste. Despite his fumbling attempts, he was finally able to get his hook appropriately set and mimicked Will’s cast, both of their lines pulled by the current to bob together, the corks bright against the water.

Will heaved a deep, happy sigh, face tipped up to the breeze, eyes closing. He could feel Hannibal next to him, his warmth and his scent comforting, the vibration of his presence through Will’s bond a soothing tickle along his nerves. He drew a deep breath, holding his fishing rod lightly, and smiled when Hannibal said, “You look content, Will.”

“I am,” he said, slitting one eye open to find his husband watching him, his eyes hooded against the sun but tender, his gaze soft.

“I wish you could always be so,” Hannibal murmured, turning his attention to his line before the intensity of his gaze could make Will nervous.

“Days like this are worth two of any other,” Will said. He looked back over the water and sighed, content to bask in the moment.

“Are you still tired?” Hannibal asked, mistaking his deep breath for a stifled yawn.

“A bit,” Will admitted, chuckling. “I could not rest last night for thinking of your school and its possibilities. The lives it will change and the lives it will save is remarkable. I must admit, Hannibal, it is rather more progressive than I had credited you with.”

“Intelligence is a rarity our society can ill-afford to squander,” Hannibal said. “The medical world is advancing and we need sharp minds to stay abreast of innovations.”

“Between the way in which you swooped to the rescue of your young ladies and your talk of teaching medicine to women as well as Omegas, I find myself amazed,” Will admitted, lazily reeling his line in to recast. “I had never imagined you to be so altruistic.”

“Given my impressive ego?” Hannibal teased, delighted when one of Will’s eyebrows thoroughly disapproved. He chuckled and sighed, content to enjoy his time with Will any way he could manage. “I will have you know that I am the very picture of altruism, Will.”

“Not to mention the picture of modesty.” Will laughed.

“While we are speaking of my finer qualities,” Hannibal said, smoothly segueing to his proposal. “The Ministry of War is sponsoring its annual charity Masquerade this evening. It is always a big draw in the Capital for the off-Season. I usually just don’t; however, I might be compelled to go if you were so inclined.”
Will cocked his head, unable to repress a small smile to see Hannibal preen a bit under his gaze, sitting just a touch taller, the unquestioned Lord of all he surveyed.

Except of Will, of course.

“I do hope by ‘charity’ they do not mean to divert the monies raised to fund their war effort,” Will said, his gaze following the light bob of Hannibal's cork. “I could never support that.”

“You're a pacifist?”

“A pragmatist,” Will corrected. “The war has dragged on far too long. It is a wonder there are any men left to father children.”

“Luckily, many of them did their fathering before they left these shores,” Hannibal told him. “The proceeds go to support the families they left behind, as well as the wounded soldiers who have returned home. There will be drinking and dancing and an unfortunate mixture of the two before the night is over. It could be fairly entertaining for that alone. Were we lucky, Aunt Margaret would be there. She does so love to dance and cannot hold her drink.”

Will chuckled at the image Hannibal conjured, his thoughts moving back to Mina's exuberant recounting of the balls she attended in her role as Lady Rathmore. It made him wonder what Hartford would look like should Grandfather throw a ball, and he got lost in a ballroom lit with thousands of tapers, filled with gorgeous gowns and twinkling jewels and dapper jackets, all twirling to the lively strains of an orchestra.

“It won't be worth seeing until near midnight,” Hannibal said, noticing his absorbed expression. “We'll see how you feel by then, hm?”

“I'll feel perfectly fine,” Will said, giving him a sour look that made Hannibal grin in delight. “You needn't coddle me, Lord Clarges. I think I should like to see the dancers, at least! But we have no masks or costumes.”

“There are always such available to purchase, though I would prefer to have something made to your preference,” Hannibal said, not entirely pleased with the possibility of looking shabby. “However, I am sure there will be several shops from which to choose. The invitations languished at the Townhouse and now it is far too late to start from scratch, but we will be properly masked for it nonetheless. If all else fails, we can always check what is in storage. The attics are filled to bursting. We Lecters are very reluctant to let go of anything.”

“Yes, I am aware,” Will said, smiling when Hannibal accepted it with an elegant cock of his head. “Then we are agreed. We'll attend your charity ball this evening.”

“Indeed we will,” Hannibal said, and added with a twinkle in his amber eyes. “As you are my husband, I will do as you say.”

Will skated a sly glance at him and his rueful smile became soft laughter better than any music to Hannibal's discerning ear. Even more precious was the excitement that filled his blue eyes when he spied Hannibal's cork go under and said, “You've got a bite!”

Will's excitement was infectious and Hannibal abandoned himself to Will's whims, content to go where his mate led and hopeful that he could close the gap between them.

The fish got away despite Will's best efforts to instruct him, a laughing struggle of futility that ended with lost bait, a lost fish, and a sizable tree branch dragged up from the riverbed. Hannibal declared himself a hopeless fisherman in short order and retrieved his journal from their gear, content to sketch Will as he fished. The morning moved towards afternoon in companionable, light conversation and a good haul, though Will threw them all back the wiser for their near misfortune.

They lunched in the shade and shared a bottle of wine, barefoot and relaxed, cuffs rolled and waistcoats abandoned, neckerchiefs cast aside and shirts loosened. Will read aloud from his dreadful book, laughing at the faces Hannibal made and trying not to be self-conscious that his husband was sketching him yet again.

“You must surely have every expression I can make, by now,” Will said at last, putting his book aside when his eyes began to strain. He moved closer, stretching out on his belly next to where Hannibal lay with his journal tipped in offering, Will thumbed through the pages, his amusement whetted by his growing pleasure, though it left him flustered to see himself through his husband's eyes. “You have idealized me.”

“Not in the least,” Hannibal said, sitting up to turn the book back several thick pages. “Who is this?”

“Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, delighted by the likeness. “And your grandfather!”
“Do they seem idealized?” Hannibal pressed, petting Will’s hair.

“No,” Will admitted, grinning and flipping to the front of the book, his smile fading to see sketches of men who were clearly soldiers, a composition of haunted eyes, taut mouths, and stiff postures. Others were weary, slumped in poses of extreme exhaustion, huddled in pain, while others were staring off at better times, poised on the cusp of tears Will could all but feel. “Hannibal, these are remarkable.”

“My first unit,” Hannibal told him, flicking through the pages with ease to open it to a new section. “Captain Rogers, an Alpha in charge of the last unit Berger and I were attached to. I never knew at the time, but the majority of these portraits here are of Omegas.”

Will moved through them slowly, seeing how well Hannibal had captured them in their anguish and bravery, nervous tension suffusing them, a tribute to their strength in the face of war.

The soldiers gave way to a dark-haired woman with a serious stare sitting hand-in-hand with another dark-haired woman who seemed softer, no less hardened by life but more forgiving.

“That is Margot,” Hannibal said, pointing at the first woman. “And Alana.”

“They are both so beautiful,” Will breathed, caught in the symmetry of their mirrored positions, in the graceful curve of wrists and throats and shoulders, in the steel he could see reflected in their eyes.

“They made good subjects,” Hannibal said, watching Will turn the pages, the illustrations of his life he never imagined his mate would find interesting. “That is Marissa, our daughter.”

Will’s brows rose, and Hannibal laughed, embarrassed, “Force of habit. Every baby I deliver is mine, it feels. I have raised her as my own.”

“I expect, were I to decide in your favor,” Will murmured, looking at the sweet, happy little face Hannibal had sketched, “you would wish us to further her prospects?”

“Only with your permission,” Hannibal said. “She is a lovely and loving child and I only want the best for her.”

“I will insist on knowing them,” Will said, continuing his rapt perusal.

“I hoped you would,” Hannibal admitted. “We will all deal with one another quite a bit in the future, if you so choose. I pray we may all be friends together.”

Will paused on another page, a dark-haired little girl looking both appalled and delighted by the snail on her hand, her mouth rounded in a way that rather reminded him of Hannibal.

“Mischa,” Hannibal breathed. “My little sister. Well, as near as I can recall her. I draw her at times, so that I may remember her.”

“There are no paintings of her?” Will asked, troubled.

“No,” Hannibal said, tracing the curve of her cheek without quite touching the paper. “The only portrait of her was in a locket around her mother’s neck. It was lost... the night I lost them all. I do my best not to let time take what little their accident left me.”

“She was very beautiful,” Will said, feeling a pang of grief for her, such a short life ended in such a terrible way. He wondered if Hannibal might be willing to talk of it, but he did not push. Some pains, he knew all too well, were better left in memory.

“She greatly resembled her mother, who was a considerable beauty,” Hannibal said, thinking of her despite himself. “I should have known that Mischa was Omegan, like her mother...”

Will glanced up at him, surprised into saying, “She was? And you knew nothing of it?”

“I was too young to tell by scent and my father refused to allow anyone to educate me,” Hannibal said, frowning when the admission cracked a door on his memory he’d held closed all of his adult life. “Her mother tried to keep us separated...”

‘...child is a bastard in the end and you’ll keep her clear of the boy or I’ll ship her off...’

“Hannibal?” Will asked, frozen by his sudden tension and the surge in his anxiety.

“Forgive me, I just... it’s been a very long time since I looked back on my childhood so deeply,” Hannibal breathed, giving Will a smile that wavered at the edges. “I think perhaps it was a separation at my father’s insistence.”

“Why should anyone want to separate siblings?” Will asked, thinking aloud rather than questioning Hannibal. “You both shared his blood. She was as much your sister as she was his daughter.”
“He was a difficult man and I have very limited memories of him,” Hannibal said, musing, “Which I suppose is odd in itself as I was already ten when the accident took them from me.”

Will frowned, thoughtful and considering. “That is somewhat more than odd, Hannibal... But you said that your past was unhappy. It is the nature of man to abandon that which troubles him and embrace that which does not. If you have chosen to forget your past, it is only to focus your energy on the present.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal said with a smile, but it troubled him all the same and he could feel it lingering at the back of his mind, tempting closer inspection.

“Is this Galley Field?” Will asked, distracting him with ease, hoping to draw him away from his unhappy thoughts.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, willing to be diverted by his mate and recalling that he was not the only one with a past he’d rather not examine. If Will could look at his sketches and find pleasure in them on this beautiful day, considering all he’d lived through, then Hannibal could strive to be his equal in pleasant company. “We can go there, if you like.”

Will said nothing to that, merely continued to turn the pages until he came back to those of himself, captured in talented strokes of lead with a carefree beauty he simply could not recognize himself in.

“These are all incredibly beautiful, Hannibal. You’re very talented,” he said, lightly touching the corner of the page where Hannibal had sketched him in a moment of laughter, and the young man he saw there seemed a stranger to him.

“You are a pleasure to sketch, Will,” Hannibal said, smiling at how flustered he became.

“I have never looked like this,” Will softly laughed, blushing. “These could be my sister.”

“You are far more beautiful than your sister,” Hannibal said, taking the book from him and closing it, tying it with its frayed ribbon. He put the book aside and stroked Will’s hair again, just watching him, considering him.

“My father used to tell me I was ugly,” Will whispered, dropping his gaze to his hands, picking at the blanket Hannibal had spread for their lunch. The fingers in his hair were gentle and he turned to offer more of his head for the enjoyable touch, not even aware that he had done so. “I always wondered how Mina could be so lovely and I so frightful when we shared the same features. He told me it was a... deficit of personality that made me unwholesome. How does one overcome a deficit of personality?”

“By ignoring one’s father for being a fool,” Hannibal said, smiling when Will’s eyes darted up to his. He sighed and helped Will to sit up, half in the curve of his body, closer than Will usually allowed him to get. He smoothed Will’s wild curls again and cupped his cheek, intending to reassure his mate.

His words got lost in the limpid depth of Will’s blue eyes, in the supple way he turned to face Hannibal with his full mouth parted on a question that never came. Hannibal moved on instinct, exerting gentle pressure on his cheek, ripe potential blooming like sweet fruit between them.

Will didn’t resist the touch or Hannibal’s insistence. His heart pounded in his chest and it took all of his strength not to shiver, half with panic and half with excitement. It was so dangerous to let Hannibal close to him, dangerous to let his mockery of a bond grow stronger, dangerous to feel his skin burn where Hannibal touched him as if heat was the only thing he could offer in return. His eyes widened when Hannibal leaned into him, the fingers on his jaw tipping his head up until they were eye to eye, nose to nose. Will thought he should speak, put a stop to it for both their sake’s, but all that came out was a soft exhale.

Hannibal’s tender gaze was filled with warmth, with affection, with a desire Will could not understand with his lack of experience. Their eyes met and both of them smiled, tentative and hopeful. He shivered when Hannibal nudged him in a slow, cautious nuzzle, the tremble that coursed through Will shaking Hannibal as well. The sensation of skin brushing skin, of whispering breath, of fluttering eyelashes washed over him and he lifted his hand to Hannibal’s shoulder to steady himself, fingers stroking aimless patterns.

Hannibal inhaled his sweet scent, stronger for being out in the sun, and rubbed his cheek against Will’s, resting there for a moment to savor the touch of his warm, silky skin and the enticing perfume rising up to meet him. Will felt more than heard him softly ask, “May I?”

He swallowed hard and tried twice to speak, wet his lips, and finally managed, “Y-yes...”

The sweet trail of Hannibal’s mouth on his cheek forced his eyes to flutter closed and Will held perfectly still, perfectly breathless. It was butterfly faint and gentle pressure against the corner of his mouth, teasing, soft, and coaxing. Will turned
just a fraction, lips meeting lips, a throaty sound escaping him when Hannibal's hand tightened gently on his jaw, holding him where he wanted him.

Hannibal swallowed Will's gasp, covering his mouth with his own, a sweet press of lips encouraged by the way Will opened for him, hesitant but eager. He trailed his tongue lightly over the plump fullness of Will's lower lip and sucked, the slight, excited noise he elicited from his mate bringing his blood to a boiling point. He tipped his head, seeking entrance, Will quickly adapting and mirroring his kiss. Will's slender fingers clenched in his shirt and tugged, urging him closer, and he deepened the kiss, thrilling to the tentative touch of Will's tongue against his, cautious and light.

He tasted of sweet wine and fruit, of heat and startled welcome, of trembling excitement and innocence. His slender body vibrated in Hannibal's grip, a wild, fey creature only half-trapped in the mortal realm, kissing him back with a strength of passion that promised to erupt in the same fiery way as his temper.

Hannibal bit softly and sucked, drawing a moan from Will, answering it with one of his own. Will responded to that sound, to the need he could feel heavy in his belly and echoing from his husband. He coiled against Hannibal and shifted to offer more of his mouth, more of himself, open and willing. Even the intensity he could feel growing in Hannibal's kisses couldn't inspire caution—he wanted this, wanted the startling, skillful thrust of his tongue and the coaxing suck on his own, wanted the way Hannibal purred into his mouth with each breath, as if desire could be divorced from preference and render him something with the potential to inspire it.

He wanted this to never end, to never leave this moment that was so entirely peaceful and perfect.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed, his kisses more urgent. He couldn't keep the hunger hidden, couldn't resist exploring Will's mouth as thoroughly as he could manage without frightening him. His hand dropped from Will's jaw and sought his waist, pulling Will flush against him, caressing the taut muscle of his sleek side, feeling the shiver that wracked them both.

There was a new side of himself unfolding and Will marveled at it. It swelled within him with force, pounding like a heartbeat, something which fed on his husband's kisses and clamored for more. It was dangerous and demanding, awakening his senses to every touch, every sound, every exquisite moment. It might have frightened him with its force, but he was too awed by how long he had hidden it to be afraid. It made him bold, fearless even, as if the cliff within him held no danger he could not conquer so long as he could feast on Hannibal's kiss.

It was physically painful for them both to back off, to rein in the urge to tumble back on the blanket and carry things to their natural conclusion. It was a testament to their mutual willpower that they softened the kiss, but Hannibal was reluctant to let it end. He slid his wet mouth to Will's chin, to his cheeks, to his closed eyelids and the tip of his nose, gentle worship and tender affection that made Will's eyes burn with tears he couldn't explain, couldn't acknowledge even now.

“You are beautiful,” Hannibal whispered, kissing his mouth again, finding the little nub of his earlobe and biting it gently just to hear the catch in Will's breath. “You are clever and funny and astonishing.” He kissed his jaw, the fading knot on his head with care, the arch of his eyebrows. “You are wonderful and surprising and kind.”

He kissed his lips once more and pressed his forehead to Will's, breathing, “You are even more beautiful inside than out, Will, and that is the very best kind of beautiful a person can be.”

Will's eyes fluttered open, his eyes swimming with unshed tears, his long lashes mingling with Hannibal's own. He drew in Hannibal's breath as he exhaled, floating in his scent and the warm acceptance he could feel breaking his heart into pieces, putting them back together again in a new and painful configuration cemented with hope. He stroked Hannibal's shoulder, warm and solid muscle shifting beneath the thin material of his shirt, mirroring the caress of Hannibal's hand on his side.

Hannibal smiled at him, slight and filled with tenderness. His hand slid from Will's side to his cheek and caressed him, then into his hair to gently tease through his curls. He nuzzled his nose against Will's and stayed there, eyes closed as if he relished their closeness.

It was a strange thing to consider, imagining that his husband might genuinely enjoy being with him. Strange and wondrous, and Will's hand moved from Hannibal's shoulder to his cheek, his fingertip tracing the track of stitching with delicacy before falling to brush his mouth. Hannibal kissed Will's fingertips and a soft, embarrassed laugh escaped him, nerves making an appearance at long last.
Hannibal eased back and gave Will his space, noting with delight how rosy his cheeks were and how flustered but pleased he was. Seeing him beneath the afternoon sun, jostled free of his composure to show the young man within, Hannibal couldn’t keep from hoping he could bring his somber, solemn mate to be even more open in the future.

Will’s full mouth curled in a lopsided, endearing smile and he said, “Thank you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s brows rose and Will clarified, “For bringing me here. For this afternoon... it was very thoughtful of you.”

“I want you to be happy, Will,” Hannibal said, and slid his fingertips over Will’s in a light caress. “I cannot change the past, as you have said, but I can ensure that your present is all that it should be.”

Will pondered that, a slight frown wrinkling his brow as he considered Hannibal’s words against his father’s insistence, against his own doubts.

“Shall we attempt to make a fisherman of me after all?” Hannibal asked, curling his fingers into Will’s and lifting them to press a kiss to his knuckles, hoping to distract Will from whatever denials his terrible upbringing might offer. “Or should we leave for the Capital?”

“Already?” Will asked, his worries giving way to sudden excitement at the suggestion. “Will there be time to see the city before the ball?”

“It is less than an hour by coach,” Hannibal said, releasing Will’s hand with a final squeeze to begin gathering up the remnants of their lunch. “We can explore as much as you like for as long as you like.”

Will felt a flutter of excitement at the prospect of seeing the Capital, but reined it in to ask, “And what is your professional opinion, Doctor Lecter? Am I well enough to enjoy such a trip?”

“You came here by coach feeling much worse than you do at present,” Hannibal said, chuckling softly as he repacked the basket. “An hour will hardly harm you, and if you fatigue we can always make an early night of it. I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

“Do you think you’ve been underwhelming me to this point?” Will remarked, smiling at the way Hannibal’s bright eyes flashed with humor.

“I certainly hope not,” Hannibal said. “I’ll have Jimmy and Berger pack overnight bags and we’ll be on our way. After a wash, of course. Fishing is remarkably stinky business.”

Will laughed, amused by the way his nose wrinkled with distaste. The ebullient feeling seemed to buoy him up as they reloaded their gear and headed back to Marsham, and Will couldn’t help but wonder if such a pleasant peace could truly last.

They rode back to Marsham Heath in comfortable conversation, and it did not seem so strange to be doubled up on Hannibal’s patient horse, leaning back into the cradling warmth of his body. Even the steadying hand tucked at his waist only felt inviting, safe, and comforting, and Will hardly realized when his own hands fell to rest on Hannibal’s thighs, curving around the muscle there as if that very place had been formed to suit his touch.

Moseley was in full swing as they emerged from the woods onto the lane up to Marsham, its inhabitants doing brisk, industrious business on this beautiful day. From the height of the hill where Marsham Heath sat, Will could clearly see the road to the Capital at the far end of town. He noted with some surprise a rather large group of soldiers moving south towards the sea and felt a sudden flare of worry.

“That can’t bode well,” Hannibal remarked, his amber eyes fastened on the passing company. He drew the horse to a stop, his attention fixed on the soldiers.

“They’ve been mobilized,” Will said, more to himself than to Hannibal. “Where is the nearest garrison?”

“Blackwall,” Hannibal said. “We passed it on the way in to Marsham. These men are heading towards the port.”

“I thought the war was winding down,” Will said, anxiety settling in his chest when he glanced at Hannibal and saw the pensive, worried look on his face.

Will was not reassured when his husband softly said, “So did I.”

Hannibal’s gaze stayed fixed on the soldiers. There was a frown on his lips, stern and severe, making the stark planes of his face once more into Apollo’s, godlike in his reserve.
Will found it easy enough to follow the train of his thoughts. He, too, looked back at the soldiers, the trailing end of their formation moving past in a haze of faint dust that seemed to cloud the promise of their new beginning. “Perhaps you’ll find out more at the ball this evening.”

“Excuse me?” Hannibal said, jolted out of his thoughts by Will’s comment.

“There will be representatives from the Ministry there,” Will said, rubbing the bend of Hannibal’s arm, light and soft, but the touch going straight through him to chase away his tension. “They will not keep the truth of the situation from you, surely.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Hannibal admitted, covering Will’s hand with his in gentle press.

Will drew in a slow breath and asked, “They wouldn’t ask you to return, would they, Hannibal? Considering you are your grandfather’s heir?”

The uncertainty in Will’s words did strange things to Hannibal’s heart and he tipped his head to Will’s to drop a kiss on his temple.

“Let’s don’t borrow trouble,” Hannibal said, shoving his disquiet down. He knew that Will, astute as he was, couldn’t be fooled by such a show, but he didn’t argue when Hannibal said, “Nothing like that should happen, Will.”

It didn’t escape Will’s notice that he didn’t add, ‘I promise...’

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Upon return to Marsham, Jimmy and Berger promptly packed small trunks for their stay and set out ahead of them. After a wash and a change of clothes, Will and Hannibal were packed into the coach and on the road to the Capital, still with no sign of Francis.

It took less than a quarter-hour before road they hit the outskirts, the small villages growing larger and spreading wider, humanity reaching out for the Capital that connected them all.

The city came up around them out of nowhere, the buildings rising up, horses and carriages and all manner of people moving past the windows in a flurry that made Will’s head spin. He gazed out at it in silent awe, eyes wide, hardly aware of Hannibal leaning over him to watch with him.

The noise was astonishing, as were the smells, everything pungent overload, yet he couldn’t stop staring, stop breathing it in, stop soaking it up, greedy to fill his mind with its details.

Hannibal stayed silent behind him for the longest time, watching him experience a city he himself knew well enough to find mundane. The coachman, on his prior instruction, drove them to every site of importance their great city held, and Hannibal pointed out buildings and landmarks Will had only seen in the papers or in books. They saw other Peers, famous actresses and actors, and Hannibal resolved to take him to the theater at his earliest opportunity. They turned onto the Row and Will gaped at the storefronts, the excess of richly-dressed people spending far too much time and far too much money on frivolities. It took twice as long to tour the city than it did to reach it in the first place, and Will was more relieved than disappointed when Hannibal ordered the coach to the Townhouse. There was so much for him to take in it left him tired with the threatening beginnings of a headache.

“Chelsea House is on its own garden square, which keeps it a bit off the main thoroughfare,” Hannibal said, pointing to the tall building coming into view. “But my office is just a block off and I admit I am excessively fond of our location.”

“Chelsea House,” Will said, rediscovering his smile and excitement as the coach rolled to a stop. The stately building stood alone on the garden square, peacefully solitary but not removed from the bustle of the city. It rose up rather than out, narrow to Will’s eyes, but exquisitely detailed on the outside, as if the architect had been determined to make up for the lack of bulk with ornamentation.

“Where I spend the majority of my time,” Hannibal said, opening the door before the footman could reach them in order to let Will clamber out. “It was much easier to tend my practice from here than run back and forth to Galley Field.”

Will stood there before the building just looking at it, breathing in the mingling scents of blossoming flowers, stagnant water, and fumes from the factories—a dizzying and cloying mixture of scents that would take some getting used to.

Hannibal stopped next to him, smiling at him when Will met his gaze. The kiss they shared returned with vivid sensation, the memory of it pinking Will’s cheeks.
“I had always assumed you lived at Galley Field and did just that,” Will said, touching the railing of the stairs as he moved towards the door in a futile attempt to distract himself.

“Holidays, usually,” Hannibal said, coming up just behind him. “But with my practice and duties here in the Capital, Chelsea House has been home for the most part.”

The door swung open to admit them, revealing a stern-looking butler whom Hannibal referred to as Mr. Black before whispering in Will’s ear, “He pretends to be deaf as a post but he hears everything, trust me.”

Will grinned, relieved when the door swung closed behind them to shut out the din and the scents. The inside of Chelsea House smelled of wood polish, pastries, and lemon oil, a welcome bouquet that made Will aware of just how much his head was beginning to ache.

“Mr. Black, this is Will, my spouse,” Hannibal said, placing a firm hand at the base of Will’s spine. “Naturally, as he is also Lord Clarges, you’re to mind him as you do myself.”

“I will be sure to mind him, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, the words slow and measured. He blinked in Hannibal’s direction and added, “As I do not mind you.”

Will stifled surprised laughter and Hannibal drew up, miffed, saying with stiff dignity, “Well, you didn’t have to tell that, Black.”

“Welcome to Chelsea House, my Lord” Mr. Black said, inclining his head to Will. “We have been waiting so very, very, very long to meet you.”

“That’s quite enough of that. Go do something useful,” Hannibal said, turning his attention to Will as Mr. Black saw to the door. “How are you feeling after our little ride?”

“My head is aching some,” Will admitted, touching the bruise on his temple. “But I would rather not take anything, if you don’t mind. The air here is quite thick.”

“It takes some adjusting,” Hannibal said, and signaled to a maid peeking at them. “Take his Lordship up to the Duchess suite, please.”

“Hannibal—”

“No, no arguments,” Hannibal warned. “My husband has decided we will attend a ball this evening. We cannot do that if you are incapacitated. Take some time to rest; the Capital will still be here, I promise. I will see if we have any word from Grandfather and send notice that we are well.”

“Is that safe?” Will asked, brow furrowing. “If someone is watching Hartford—”

“Everything is going through Mr. Stammets and Mr. Buddish, our solicitor here in the Capital,” Hannibal assured him. “Nothing is posted from or to our location in a way that might give us away, though my movements have never been secret for long. If you wish to write to your sister, I would be happy to include the letter in the next packet to be sent.”

“Thank you, I should,” Will said, sighing to think of Mina at Hartford with Grandfather. Her odd behavior was very concerning and entirely unfathomable, but Will couldn’t spare the energy to worry over it. As Hannibal had said, he needed to take some rest and prepare for the evening or else he wouldn’t be fit to enjoy the very thing he had insisted on.

Hannibal sent him off with a gentle pat against his back, a gesture of familiar affection as unexpected as it was welcome, and Will gave a small smile in response before following the maid upstairs.

Will was too excited to properly rest. He spent some time alone in his suite, grand but faintly stuffy, as if it hadn’t been inhabited for years. It made Will wonder where Alana and Margot had stayed when at the Townhouse, if Hannibal had not given them the Duchess suite. It was reassuring, however, to know he had not put them in every place Will should have been. Perhaps part of him had known better, after all.

Jimmy was out at Will’s insistence for a much-needed break and he found himself alone, staring out at the city from his window. The time of day was such that no year-round Society folk were to be seen yet as they were resting away the afternoon before a night of activities. The street below was still thick with traffic, maids and footmen on errands, people walking their masters’ dogs, carts trundling back and forth with baskets, and the occasional street merchant being shooed away by a passing constable.
He abandoned the window to admire the suite, which was smaller by necessity but still richly appointed and even updated with gas lines, which Will determined they should get as soon as possible out at Hartford House.

Prevented from exploring at large, he made do exploring his suite, coming at last to the wardrobe where Jimmy had already unpacked him. There was a lamp near the doorway which the servants used to light the windowless little room. Will lit it and went inside the vast closet simply out of curiosity.

His own things took up more room than he expected, considering Jimmy had packed for a short stay. There were a few boxes neatly shelved and he fetched one down, putting the lamp on the small jewelry dresser in the corner so he could pry the lid up.

There were trinkets inside, calling cards, loose buttons, programs for plays and operas that had not run in fifty years. It seemed to be the contents of the Duchess vanity cleared out, perhaps after the tragic death of Roland's wife. It had all been swept into a box to make way for someone new, but Will had no idea who that might be, as Grandfather had never remarried.

The other box was a lacquered jewelry box, a rich, deep color that gleamed in the light even with its layer of dust. He picked up his little lamp and went out into his sunlit room to better inspect it, putting everything back where he had found it and placing the box on his vanity.

It was even more intriguing once he could see it properly. A scene was inlaid on the top, elegant cranes captured in dusty flight, mother-of-pearl wings outstretched. Curious, he lifted the small latch and opened it.

The hope for mystery was defeated by the sight of its faded silk lining, revealing only an empty box. Disappointed, he started to close it again, but noticed the edge of the lining had pulled away from the bottom, was frayed a bit as if having been tugged many times over the years of its life.

Curiosity and excitement renewed, Will grasped it with gentle caution and pulled. The lining slipped free as it did on his own jewelry box, and beneath was the plain wooden base, with just the smallest divot for a determined fingernail. He pried it up, delighted to find a false bottom.

And nestled within it was a strange book.

He fished it out, noting the binding was some unusual substance he'd never seen before, wood-like and pliable. It was sewn on the outside of the cover in a manner that bewildered him.

“Who put you here?” Will murmured, opening the cover to find a blank page. He frowned, wondering, “Why on earth would someone hide an empty book?”

He heard a thump on the landing and started, dropping it. He hastily moved to shut the box and placed it near his own jewelry box, the book falling to one side on its face. He got to his feet, pushed his little chair in, and picked the book back up, surprised to find that the half-open back cover showed writing.

Curious, he opened the book’s back cover and scanned it, the sharp, minuscule characters printed in orderly columns in a language that he could not make any sense of. At the corner, however, there was a single paragraph written in English, tiny but clear.

I have forsaken myself. I am a warrior no longer. I have cast off the armor of my father and exchanged it for a prostitute’s robes. I must do what I can to survive. I have nothing. I own nothing. I belong nowhere and I can never go home... My family’s name is all that is left to remind me of who I am.

I am Murasaki. I am Murasaki. I am Murasaki and will always be...

Will’s eyes widened with shock. He flipped rapidly through the pages and found that the book was almost entirely filled with writing. Heart pounding, he settled in a chair near the window with the journal cradled in his lap, his thoughts busily working on how he could find out what she had written, the mysterious Lady Murasaki.

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“My Lord?”

Will woke with a start, clutching the journal to his chest and nearly tumbling from the chair. Jimmy was bustling about carrying in armfuls of clothing Will didn’t recognize.
“Goodness, what on earth time is it?” Will asked, surprised that he’d fallen asleep. He’d pondered the mystery of the journal and how best to approach the puzzle it offered so deeply he’d not realized when the questions inflaming his imagination had become his usual vivid dreams.

“Nearly nine,” Jimmy said, startling him from his thoughts with the answer. “You must’ve been very tired to fall asleep there, my Lord. You should’ve rang for me and had a proper sleep.”

“No, that’s alright, it was unexpected, Jimmy,” Will said, scanning the clothing with a frown. “What is all this?”

“Potentially, your costume,” Jimmy answered. “Lord Clarges had us up in the attic but he deemed every bit of clothing unfit. He sent Berger and I out for costumes, instead. Surprisingly large selection for so little notice, but the Lecter name works miracles in most instances.”

“Sent out for them, did he. Has he chosen anything?” Will asked, gingerly getting to his feet, his back complaining at the abuse of sleeping in a chair.

“He said he would wait until you chose, and he would dress to match,” Jimmy said.

Will moved to the window instead, the journal cradled to his chest, his attention ensnared by the view of the city beyond lit up in the darkness. “My goodness, Jimmy...”

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Jimmy asked, smiling with delight. “Chelsea House is situated so nicely! That garden square is just beautiful, my Lord. I was already peeking at it from the basement. It’s so nice the property stands alone, isn’t it? It feels less crowded. And Mr. Black, the butler, is just the most darling man. Goodness, he is a sassy spirit!”

He went on, but Will only half heard him. His attention was entirely taken by the sight of townhouses stretching into the distance, lit by globes of gas lamps so bright the glow reflected from the canopy of smoke and smog. Carriages passed by almost right beneath his window, bearing servants on unknown tasks and gentlemen off to their own pursuits as the Capital geared itself up for a night of decadent gaiety.

And tonight Will was going to be a part of it.

“I’ve only read about it, heard about it,” he said, moving away from the window with a hammering heart when Jimmy stood back to let him choose. “It’s so much more grand than I thought it would be. Seeing the architect’s designs certainly didn’t do the reality any justice.”

“I imagine you’ll be seeing quite a bit that fits that bill, Lord Clarges,” Jimmy said, beaming. “Now, here are the masks, and these are all he asked for...”

He started holding up costume after costume, costly beaded and bejeweled pieces stiff with lace and chased with embroidery, heavy with pearls, of every color and style imaginable. There were even dresses among them. Will felt a strange, heavy pang to see them, and asked, “Jimmy, did he know there would be dresses?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Jimmy said, bending to lift one in his arms and hold it up. “He was very specific about what he wanted—male attire, female attire, and even the newest Omegan styles that have caught on in the Capital. Naturally, I know your sizing and we sorted accordingly.”

Will subsided, surprised. Jimmy smiled at him and said, “He specifically told me that you should have your choice of anything that takes your fancy, and not to think about it too much. It’s a masquerade ball, after all. No one will know you unless you wish them to.”

“No one,” Will said, an idea forming.

He leveled a weighty look at Jimmy, who said, “Oh no. I know that look. My Lord, whatever you—”

“Let me have a look, Jimmy,” Will said, the strange revelations of the journal momentarily pushed aside for his heightening excitement. He tucked the little book up safely beneath his pillow before returning to the costumes, the revelations of the dead forsaken for the pleasures of the living.

Dresses, Omegan-style clothing, men’s fashions—for the first time Will felt the trembling delight of choosing without restraint and the possibilities made his heart stir. Faceless and nameless, he could watch the crowd without any expectations of him. He could be anyone in the world, free to chase or be chased... or even kissed. It made his heart thunder with excitement, keyed his nerves with anticipation.
On such a night, anything at all could happen—princesses could meet their princes, Peers could dance with a milliner’s daughter, and Will might shed all disguises. For once he could be the self he dreamed of, the person who slumbered in his secret heart.

If only just for one night.

Hannibal, for the first time in a long time, was indecisive about his wardrobe. He was a man of varied tastes in dressing himself, demanding only the best quality, the most current fashions, the most expensive fabric, the most in-demand tailor—he was never at a loss for what to wear.

The costumes were no different. They were so far out of anyone else’s ability to pay that he had before him only the finest, most exquisite pieces in his size.

But he kept thinking of Will’s blue eyes beneath his thick and disapproving eyebrows, of the set of his mouth when he was displeased. He kept thinking of the way he looked when he laughed with genuine delight, unselfconscious and abandoned.

“Ah, Berger, what do you think?” he asked when his valet came in to help him dress. “There is the mask I have chosen, but I am at a loss with the costume. I’ve narrowed it down to two—”

“Whichever one you picked first, m’Lord,” Berger said, well used to this particular ritual and knowing how it usually fell out. “M’Lord, I need you to not panic.”

“It’s a costume, Berger, not a guillotine,” Hannibal said, somewhat bewildered by his serious tone. He looked over at his valet to chide him but it died on his lips. Feeling the rise of the panic Berger dreaded, he asked, “What’s happened?”

“Well, it’s like this, m’Lord,” Berger said, hangdog expression firmly in place. “Price said his Lordship asked him to get your guest invitation and bring it to him.”

Hannibal just stared at him, fear and worry melding into a burning coal in his chest.

“Now, he’ll be safe as can be, my Lord. He asked me to be sure of it for your peace of mind, so I pulled two men from the agency to ride as footmen, another two of our boys to back them up, the coachman will keep an eye on him, and Price will ride on the coach with him,” Berger said. “But he wants to go alone to the ball.”

“Alone,” Hannibal whispered, looking aside before Berger could read the disappointment in his expression. A thousand worries assailed him—what if the murderer, by some cosmic fluke, managed to locate Will and hurt him? What if someone offended him? What if, what if, what if, and a thousand more things he could neither control nor prevent. But Will had chosen to take the risk.

He had chosen to go alone.

Hannibal lowered the costume, resenting the fine trembling of his hands, and said, “Then I suppose I don’t need any of this...”

“He did leave this for you, m’Lord,” Berger said, not without sympathy, and handed him a folded note.

Hannibal took it and unfolded it, heart pounding. Will’s graceful but no-nonsense script crossed the fine paper in just one line.

Catch me for a kiss if you can, Lord Clarges.

Hannibal grinned and loosed a soft, delighted laugh, his relief leaving him shaken. He placed the note carefully on his vanity and turned to his choices with renewed passion.

“Hop to, Berger,” he said, hastening to ready himself.

“M’Lord?”

“My husband has issued a challenge,” Hannibal said, and turned that ferocious, eager grin on his longtime valet. “And I will not lose.”
The glass gas globes that lined the street were indeed as beautiful as Hannibal had hinted. Their light cast an ethereal glow on the world around him as the coach rolled past on its way to the ballroom affectionately referred to as the Colosseum. There was a festive air to the evening, the streets already busy with coaches, with people on horseback, with revelers on the walk. With nothing more to entertain them, those left to dwell in the Capital were more than eager to spend the evening in intrigue at the charity ball. Even those who could not attend were caught up in the atmosphere, pointing at the fantastic costumes and enjoying the spectacle.

Will could not resist the urge to stare out as they drew near, the image of glittering, elaborate costumes on the misty, lamp-lit streets etched in his memory. The sidewalks grew thick with people, those who could not come by coach taking a leisurely stroll to enjoy the anticipation.

He heard a clamor of hoof beats and shrieking laughter and leaned to look out of the opposite window just as an outlandish fantasy of a pirate rode past bearing an equally re-imagined barmaid on his lap. Will’s heart picked up its pace and he touched his mask again, feeling to be sure that it was firmly in place. The ties, knotted carefully by Jimmy, were twined to defy tugging and buried beneath his long curls. The reassuring security of it calmed him and Will took a deep breath, fruitlessly trying to quiet his nerves.

The coach slowed almost to a stop. Music reached him despite the closed windows of the coach. It was faint beneath the sound of laughter, the noise of people enjoying themselves already at even this early hour. He swallowed hard, excited and almost regretting he had left Hannibal behind him.

‘Catch me for a kiss if you can...’

His own audacity shocked him, but this was a night for rash decisions heedless of consequence. This was a night for gaiety and dancing. Regrets could come tomorrow, with all the bitter flavor of familiarity, but tonight was Will’s and he intended to live a lifetime within it.

With such an uncertain future and such a decision before him, this might be his first—and his last—chance to cast off inhibition and simply enjoy himself.

The coach drew to a stop and shifted as the footmen jumped down. There was a press of people awaiting entry, most of whom turned at Will’s arrival to see what new person of import had come, there always being so few at a charity event. The ducal coaches were not precisely anonymous and Will saw a flurry of fans snap open, whispered conjecture passing from lips to ears. People strained to have a view of who would emerge and Will had a burst of panic so strong it almost compelled him to abandon his plan and flee.

But he was made of sterner stuff than that. They would not know him, any of them. He was masked and anonymous, a mysterious Someone granted the honor of riding in the Duke of Westvale’s coach, and they could wonder all they liked about him.

One of the footmen opened the door and held out a gloved hand. The other cleared a path through those attending, while those gathered to look at the costumes and enjoy the pageant they could not afford to be a part of jostled to see the show.

Will took the hand he was offered and eased out of the coach, ducking his head to keep from catching the feathery ruff that ringed the sparkling, silver-chased wolf mask he’d chosen. He was restrained in his movements, careful in the unfamiliar, low-heeled shoes as he stepped down onto the walkway, drawing clear of the coach. He shook out the flounced, bustled back of his flaring jacket and let it billow down around his legs in a froth of lace and brocade. He murmured his thanks when Jimmy—looking quite fine in borrowed livery—bent to straighten the gathered, beribboned lace hem of his knee breeches, ensuring the cascading layers fell quite nicely over his pearlescent, subtly-patterned stockings.

Jimmy straightened as the coach drew away and fell into step behind Will, telling him with pride shining in his face, “You look absolutely stunning, Lord Clarges.”

Will uttered a soft, nervous thanks and moved towards the wide-flung doors, ears pinking up when people lining the walkway called out propositions to him, some of them whistling. The footman moving ahead made a threatening gesture but it only drew amused laughter and Will called him down, knowing it was harmless for the most part. Yet he was relieved all the same to reach the door through the crowd where the footman proffered his invitation.
The masked man at the entry looked at the invitation, looked at Will, looked at the liveried men with him, and Jimmy piped up, “His Lordship wishes to remain anonymous.”

The man dipped his head in a sign of courtesy and made a hasty, wide gesture for Will to enter, saying, “A very joyous welcome to you. May your evening be one of mystery and excitement.”

Will looked back at Jimmy, who beamed at him, and at the footman, who made a little urging gesture with a wide smile, and he made his way inside in a press of others costumed and perfumed for their night of revelry.

The flow of humanity ran like a river to empty out in the heart of the Colosseum. Will stared around with unabashed delight at the chandeliers glowing overhead, a succession of small suns casting a glorious golden glow on the crush of costumed humanity.

And so much humanity there was, thronging three tiers, the open upper levels milling with strangers laughing and drinking. The balustrades and columns bore garlands of flowers twined into evergreen and festive streamers fluttered in the swirling air. There was so much to see he came to a stop, fixing it all in his memory to be treasured forever.

“Excuse me...”

Will tore his gaze from his surroundings to incline his head at the couple who had come in just behind them. They were only moving past, but he was aware of the woman's stare and knew he had made an entrance without even meaning to. She stared fixedly at his costume, no doubt cataloging details for retelling, and in a heartbeat they were swallowed by the crowd.

There was a roar of laughter and Will looked in its direction from reflex, distracted from his thoughts and laughing aloud when a man dressed as a capering Harlequin flung a basket of confetti at the dancers below. The fine, colorful paper fluttered down, caught on the air moving through the open terrace doors to spread across the room. Will plucked a piece as it drifted past him, golden-bright and thin, and he tucked it into his jacket with a smile.

The orchestra was at the far end, its brisk music reaching across the massive ballroom. It was so packed within Will could hardly see the dance floor proper, and had a moment of unease wondering just how Hannibal would be able to find him among so many people.

But he would. Will knew it as surely as he knew the night would give way to the day. He had issued a challenge to Hannibal and Hannibal was, if nothing else, a proud, determined man. He would feel compelled to give chase with such provocation and not rest until he reached his goal.

Bolstered by the thought he had not made it too easy nor too hard on him, Will moved away from the dance floor towards the sweeping stairs, moving this way and that around party goers, marveling at the fantastic costumes he saw, delighted by the constant chatter and whispers and sidelong looks the guests gave one another as they gossiped and guessed who was who.

Will felt delightfully conspicuous dressed as he was—a modern-day Omegan courtier, corseted and bustled with the long, flaring skirt of his jacket spilling in layers of lace and embroidered brocade behind him, almost touching the floor. The coat cinched tightly and was seeded with pearls, the whole of it patterned in creamy, pale colors. He was a silk and pastel vision all the way down to his bejeweled, buckled, heeled shoes. It was feminine, elegant, but borrowing masculine design, a blending of the two that felt daring to an Omega who had never dreamed he would wear such a thing. People looked at him, and looked again, some murmuring to their escorts, pondering on his identity. Will inclined his head to those he caught staring and was pleased to receive an answering nod each time, acknowledgment of being part of their beautiful, candlelit world.

He came to a stop on the second level, which gave him a good view of the dancing and was a perfect place to listen to the orchestra. Even the musicians were in costume, uniformly dressed and masked, keeping up the lively music that tempted toes to tap and coaxed smiles to anonymous faces. Staff thread through the upper levels, delivering drinks to those at the gaming tables where revelers threw dice and drew cards and wailed or laughed at the result.

Will snagged one of the glasses and took a sip of citrus punch, feeling his constant, strained vigilance loosen. He longed to dance, but the idea of doing such a thing with a stranger didn't sit well. Hannibal would not be far behind him, he knew. He could wait until his husband arrived to enjoy the dancing with him. In the meantime, there were sights enough, smells enough, sounds enough to divert him and Will moved to roam again, taking in the many costumes, blushing over the behavior exhibited...
behind the cover of potted ferns and in the shadows away from the floor, laughing when a passing wizard swept his gloved hand up and kissed it before chasing down a rather frazzled-looking unicorn whose horn had fallen askew.

He came to rest against the balustrade, swaying to the music with a smile on his lips.

“What a beautiful costume you have, my dear.”

The words were delivered directly into Will's ear, startling enough that he barely restrained the urge to turn.

“What an interesting combination, topping such a... titillating ensemble with the mask of a wolf,” the man said, still leaning far too close for Will's comfort. He didn't recognize the voice, nor did he care to, though he recognized an Alpha well enough when he heard one speak.

He turned his head away, still swaying to the strains of the music and resolved to ignore the attention.

“Are you in the habit of not acknowledging a gentleman when he speaks to you?”

There was amusement but no anger, as if he couldn't fathom anyone would ever ignore him.

Realizing he was not to be left in peace, Will put his cup down on one of the many low tables and said, “Were there a gentleman speaking, I would acknowledge him.”

“You say I am no gentleman?” It was said with a chuckle and a trace of concern that he was not at all getting the response he expected.

Will turned his head and leveled a bland look at the man dressed as a Ram, and impressively so. He was rather tall and possessed of an athletic build, though Will found it was not quite as pleasing as his husband's was.

“A gentleman does not breathe into one's ear,” Will informed him, and when the man reached out to touch his arm, Will flipped his fan up into his hand and slapped his fingers soundly, stating, “Nor does he touch without invitation.”

“Is there some means of gaining an invitation from so delectable a courtier?” the Ram asked, tipping his head in a blatant exaggeration of appreciation that Will found entirely unappealing.

“There is not, unfortunately—or fortunately—enough,” Will said, his smile wry. It had the unexpected side effect of encouraging his odd admirer.

“Fortunately for whom?” the Ram asked, amused.

Will noted with satisfaction how he rubbed his smacked fingers, and ungenerously hoped it had stung. He leveled a repressive look at him and primly said, “For me.”

“Would you care for a dance, perhaps?” the Ram asked, offering his gloved hand properly this time, not daring Will's quick fan or the smack it promised.

“I am waiting for someone, sir,” Will said. “As he has not yet arrived, I am content to watch the dancers.”

The hand dropped but not his interest. “A faithful lover dressed as a courtier? What a conflicting picture you are, you Wolf. Yet you arrived in the Duke of Westvale's coach, no doubt at Lord Clarges' invitation. We know one another well, Lord Clarges and I. Do I know you?”

“You do not know me, sir,” Will informed him. “Nor I you.”

“That can be remedied with ease,” the Ram said, smiling. His Alpha fangs were not as impressive as Hannibal's were, but it was a pleasant smile all the same. “Say you will dance with me tonight! What can I give you to change your mind?”

“I will tell you tomorrow,” Will said.

The Ram laughed, delighted, saying, “A handsome figure paired with wit. I confess I am smitten.”

“Then you are far too easily impressed,” Will told him, wondering at his claim to know Hannibal, who was not at all easily impressed or patient with nonsense. Will realized people were watching them, curious and unabashedly observing their exchange, and lowered his voice to say, “If a pleasing figure and a set-down engage your interest with such speed, then it is little wonder your conversation lacks weight.”

“You can't guess who I am?” the Ram asked, exasperated by his resistance. “Surely, you must? Hannibal has never even mentioned me?”

“I have no interest in who you are,” Will said, quite honestly, at that.

“Do you speak so to Lord Clarges?” the Ram asked, grinning, but it faded when he locked eyes with Will. “You must have him tied in knots! I never in a million years imagined he would take an Omegan lover, odd, cold fish that he is.”
“Cold?” Will echoed, and had to laugh at that, the heat of Hannibal’s mouth on his still branded at the front of his memory. “You have mistaken him, sir. He is anything but cold.”

“After a friendship such as ours, I would think I know him, my dear,” the Ram said, chuckling. When Will said nothing, it seemed to mystify him and he asked, “You truly do not know me?”

“No more than you know me,” Will countered, turning his attention back to the dance floor. “I will leave it to Lord Clarges to further our acquaintance if he pleases.”

The Ram was more intent on Will than he was on the festivities around him and moved to his side, watching him as if closer inspection might reveal Will’s identity to him.

“Who are you?” he asked, all bluster set aside for genuine curiosity. “Those eyes of yours are familiar, but I have never met an Omega who could hope to overcome Hannibal’s unsavory attitudes.”

“Are you so certain I am Omegan?” Will asked, tipping his head to look at him, pleased when sudden doubt settled.

“Let me see you—”

“No,” Will told him.

It took him by surprise when the Ram reached out to him again, for his mask this time. Offended, Will drew back and fixed him with a hard, unwavering stare. With studied, dangerous calm, he warned, “If you wish to keep that hand, you will behave yourself, sir. You are not charming, nor clever, but a nuisance I should like to avoid.”

It seemed to genuinely take him aback. Either that, or he finally realized how many people were watching them. Contrite, the Ram bowed to him, formal and impressive even to Will’s critical eye.

“I beg your forgiveness, I was carried away by high spirits,” he was told. “I see now how you fit him, our Lord Clarges, and that you truly do not know me. I admit it breaks my heart, but I accept it.”

When the Ram straightened and offered his hand once more, Will grudgingly gave his own, pleased when it was lifted and not kissed. He simply wouldn’t stand for that, he knew.

“I have offended you,” the Ram said, though it seemed more for the benefit of those watching them so avidly. “Tell me how I can make amends.”

“A gentleman should not have to be told how to conduct himself,” Will reminded him, stepping closer to keep their words more private, the flared tails of his coat swirling around his trim legs as he did so.

“I would be happy to obey commands of such a comely Wolf,” the Ram said, and tugged him close enough Will heard him when he whispered, “especially if the face beneath the mask is as fair as the smile.”

“Heavens, a dog would have learned by now,” Will said, and plucked his hand away. “Allow me to see how you measure up, then. Stay.”

He turned, jacket billowing out behind him, the crowd parting to let him pass. People stared at him, but Will easily lost their gazes in the crowd, smiling to himself when the Ram stayed precisely where Will had told him to, though he seemed more bewildered than obedient.

“Wait! Wait! I know you!”

The voice reached him as recognition did. A smile spread across his face to find Beverly Katz catching up to him, dressed quite convincingly as a Privateer, complete with sheathed sword.

“Ms. Katz,” he said, tipping his head to her. “What a pleasant surprise!”

“It certainly is,” she said, eyeing him past her half-mask. “I didn’t expect to meet you here. You alone?”

She craned a look around searching for Hannibal or another escort, but Will told her, “Yes, though not for lack of trying.”

“I saw,” she said, a wry smile on her face. “You know who that is, right?”

“I couldn’t care less who that is,” Will informed her, frowning at the Ram who even now was fussing some other beleaguered soul. “His behavior is not at all gentlemanly and I refuse to indulge bad habits.”

Beverly laughed at that, delighted, and said, “Don’t worry, he isn’t as important as he thinks he is, or my father thinks he is, for that matter. Your husband didn’t mind you coming by yourself?”

“He wasn’t given a choice in the matter,” Will said, wishing he’d been able to see the look on Hannibal’s face when he’d opened that note. “Though he is no doubt on his way as we speak.”

Her smile widened to a grin when she said, “You look amazing.”
“And you look very dashing,” Will said, glad that his mask hid the way his cheeks pinked up, her honest admiration worth the empty flattery of a thousand inebriated Rams. “Are you alone?”

She snorted on a laugh and said, “No. Father and a bunch of his Merchants’ Guild council came. Apparently they have some meetings lined up off the record with the Ministry of War.”

“That sounds very clandestine,” Will said. “And illegal.”

Bev waved it away and held out her hand, saying, “Forget that, it’s a bunch of nonsense. Would you care to join us?” When Will cocked his head in inquiry, she said, “Most of my friends are here. You’ve met a few of them at the Dimmond party, remember? Come on. A party like this is no place to be alone. Especially with that sort around.”

Will nodded, grateful to have someone he knew in this crush of humanity and doubly pleased it was Ms. Katz, whose open friendliness put him instantly at ease.

“How did you know me so quickly?” he asked, matching her step for step as they moved down towards the dance floor, his hand held securely in her own.

“Are you joking?” she asked, glancing at him. “You arrived in the Duke of Westvale’s coach. The crest is big as life. I assumed it was you when I heard but I knew it was you when I saw you slap that ram like he was a brat with his hand caught in the candies. Well done, by the way.”

“Thank you, he was behaving appallingly,” Will reminded her, careful to keep the hem of his jacket flipped up over his arm to prevent it from being trod on. “Did you truly not know me until you saw me? I wondered if there would be some bit of intrigue regarding my identity.”

Beverly laughed again and sighed. “Oh, there is plenty of that already, Lord Clarges. Let’s see... So far, you’re a foreign dignitary in His Grace’s care, you’re the latest indulgence of Lord Clarges, and—this one is my favorite—you’re the Duke’s lover sent on a lark. Although the one about you being a royal concubine was pretty good, too. Not to mention believable. Did I tell you that you look good enough to eat?”

“Beverly!” Will said, shocked, but she remained unrepentant. “I have been here less than twenty minutes—”

“My dear Lord Clarges, all it takes is twenty seconds for the rumors to start,” Beverly assured him, dragging him into a group of young men and women with a crow of victory, stating, “Told you I’d find him!”

Will joined their merry little party with a smile, murmuring to himself, “Now, if only my husband is lucky enough to do so...”

Hannibal opted to ride, eager as he was to get there, and it gave him an advantage over those arriving by the coach-loads. Dressed in a black and gold military uniform, masked as a feathered stag with a spreading rack, he cut an impressive figure dancing his horse through stalled traffic and around pedestrians, even up onto the walkways at times to a chorus of shocked screams. There was a ripe promise on the air and he felt driven, his blood singing with awareness, goading him to hurry and claim his prize.

One of the footmen in Lecter livery had stationed himself at the door and hastened to Hannibal when he dismounted, taking the horse’s reins.

“Did he arrive without incident?” Hannibal asked, straightening his coat.

“He did, my Lord, and was a fair bit nervous at first, but soldiered on.”

“Yes, I imagine he did,” Hannibal said, and made for the door with a final pat on the horse’s rump as it was led away.

The line for entry parted easily for him and Hannibal had no qualms taking advantage of their surprise to hand his invitation to the doorkeeper.

The man read it once, then again, and asked, “Should you like me to announce you, my Lord?”

“Not at all,” Hannibal said, knowing he wouldn’t have to. He wondered if Will’s arrival in the ducal coach had caused a stir, because his own arrival certainly had. Peers and their spouses were uncommon at such common affairs for the most part, and Hannibal reasonably assumed that Will’s station, if not his true position, had already made its rounds of the room.
The stir he himself had caused, however, was more due to the mask he wore rather than the assistance of the liveried footman. He imagined the stretching gold and gleaming antlers in their base of inky-black feathers was enough to give anyone a good pause, and had chosen it without hesitation, unlike the rest of his wardrobe.

“A very joyous welcome to you, then, my Lord,” he was told. “May your evening be one of mystery and excitement.”

“There is no possibility for it to be otherwise,” Hannibal murmured, and moved through the doorway with the lithe grace of a panther, eager to hunt down his wayward mate.

The ballroom floor was stuffed with dancers and thick with observers. It was, as every masquerade that Hannibal had ever had the misfortune to attend, barely better than chaos. Given the opportunity to behave as they pleased with little consequence and the cloak of anonymity, people flouted the rules and indulged themselves, and this was no exception.

He strode to the edge of the crowd to the space cleared for the dancers, scanning the room, drawing a breath thick with perfume and wax and warm bodies, pomades and soaps and incense, spilled alcohol and roasting meats and the acrid-tinged air that blew in from the archways flung open to the night. If there was any trace of Will’s faint, sweet scent, he knew he would find it, even hidden as it was beneath so much distraction. It was a perfume that he was keenly tuned to, a scent that heralded bright blue eyes and wry smiles and curls as untameable as the spirit that lived within his stalwart heart.

It was home, and Hannibal searched for it, stalking the edges of the dancers with his head tipped up and the blunt spurs on his boots jingling with each step.

People drew back before him, some from recognition, most from his intensity. He was far too focused on his task to notice, however, his amber eyes scanning the upper levels with piercing concentration from behind his heavy mask.

Hannibal caught it then, faint enough to be a memory, the barest hint of the sweet-hot perfume which clung to his mate’s fair skin. He turned to trace it and moved straight across the dance floor, weaving between the dancers to follow that faint, alluring trail.

He found his husband in a crowd of admirers, one of whom Hannibal recognized as Miss Katz. He paused to watch Will as he had at the Garden Party, lively and animated, seated in a spill of thick lace, pale silk, and heavy brocade, his shapely legs crossed at the ankle before him and his painted lips parted in a grin as he laughed at the Court Jester begging him for a dance.

And then he looked up as if Hannibal had called him by name.

It was instant recognition, both of them knowing the other as surely as if gazing into a mirror. Wolf and Stag, hunter and hunted, Omega and Alpha and everything in between.

Hannibal strode to a stop before him, seeing his bright, lively blue eyes behind the pearlescent, beaded Wolf mask light up with excitement.

Will had known the second he walked into the room, as much the force of his presence as the bond that sang within him. Hannibal, in his stiff and formal clothing, seemed more himself in his fanciful uniform, his shoulders just as broad but the handsome symmetry of his trim build on display in a way his heavy coats and layers rarely showed. Will hardly felt safe letting his eyes drop lower than his chest, taking his cues from the admiring glances of those around them.

He had certainly outdone himself, Will admitted, and he graced Hannibal with a delighted smile, the Omega within him purring in pleasure that Hannibal had tracked him so effortlessly and without distraction.

Hannibal drank Will’s presence in, basked in his gaze before bowing. It was the sharp, smart bow of a soldier in keeping with the black uniform he wore, and he knew it made the most of his antlered crown.

When he straightened, he held his gloved hand out in offering, his skin tightening in response to Will’s blue eyes flicking over him, taking in the details of his stark, bold costume.

Will’s strong, gloved hand slid into his and he inclined his head, smiling as Hannibal drew him up from his seat and into the sea of dancers to a chorus of delighted clapping and laughter.

In a heartbeat they were immersed in a world of graceful music and sparkling costumes, flickering candles and gaiety. Hannibal’s hand closed around his, firm and confident, the other coming to rest beneath his arm and draw him into the dance.

Will smiled up at him, a small laugh escaping him when Hannibal deftly spun him around into the midst of the dancers, effortless and sure. Will’s smile gave way to delighted laughter, his simmering excitement bubbling over to finally be dancing in such a place, in his husband’s arms, both of them looking so unlike themselves, or more like themselves than usual. Perhaps he
was wrong and this was a night when fantasy was peeled away for reality and they were truly merely a Wolf and a Ravenstag, feral creatures of instinct and intuition armed with weapons exquisite in their savagery.

He certainly felt wolfish, fluid and beautiful, a creature of grace with a dangerous smile and a heart full of wild desires he could not bear to inspect, lest they be loosed.

He closed his eyes, the strains of the waltz filling his ears along with the laughter and conversation of those around them. He drew a deep breath heavy with Hannibal's Alpha scent, his skin tightening with awareness. He could not help but focus on the hand holding his, warm within its leather glove, on the hand at his shoulder blade, flat but tender, guiding Will securely through the steps of the dance so all he needed to do was enjoy.

He opened his eyes, his gaze finding and holding Hannibal's. His husband pulled him just a touch closer, their bodies brushing as they danced. Both were reluctant to break the silence between them, an unspoken pact to enjoy this first dance and one another without anything more to trouble them than a crowded dance floor.

The song came to an end yet they did not draw apart, merely moved smoothly into the next dance.

“You are so light in my arms,” Hannibal said, finally breaking the ripe silence that carried them through the first waltz. “You move as if you were born to it.”

“As do you, sir,” Will answered, admiring the lean strength of his husband and the graceful ease he showed in leading their dance. “Though I dare say you are more in practice than I.”

The body of dancers twirled and moved clockwise, reversing their direction on the beat.

“What do you think of the ball so far?” Hannibal inquired, speaking to Will as if he was a stranger, though the warm familiarity in his voice gave him away. “I don’t suppose you lack for company.”

“Only sufficiently diverting company,” Will said. “I lingered and hoped for a pleasant companion.”

“And have you found it?” Hannibal asked, drawing a breath over his teeth in a soft inhale, tasting the sweet-hot flavor of Will’s scent on his tongue. “Or have you no interest in me, even still?”

Will laughed, his teeth gleaming and sharp behind his paint-darkened lips. He seemed someone else entirely in his costume, some wild and fearless person with strong passions and the confidence to act on them, but it was entirely Will—his Will, wry and amused—who said, “I’m starting to.”

They changed direction. Hannibal guided him with elegant grace past a couple having a spat and beyond, carrying them away from any potential unpleasantness.

“What an interesting quandary we have,” Hannibal said, acutely aware of the press of Will’s sturdy, slim body against his, of the way the flare of Will’s coat framed him as they danced, a fitting tail for such a handsome Wolf. The bare expanse of Will’s chest peeking above the ruffled edging of his jacket was pearly-pale and distracting, and he forced his eyes up when Will cleared his throat to get his attention.

“And what quandary is that?” Will asked, repeating the question his husband had not heard. The close posture of their dance exaggerated the slight sway of his back and seemed to press him even deeper into his husband’s hold, the brush and pressure of Hannibal’s warm body against his teasing his nerves as much as his rich Alpha scent teased Will’s senses.

“A stag is hunting, and his prey is a Wolf,” Hannibal said, cocking his head ever so slightly, the spreading rack of antlers atop his head catching the light. The feathers worked in around the antlers and edges of the mask were soft and black as a raven’s wings and Will thought it suited him quite nicely. He smiled at him, memorizing the set of Hannibal’s mouth beneath the edge of his mask and the way his amber eyes drew the light, catlike and lovely.

“I have never heard of a stag going hunting,” Will said, and the longer they danced, the more attuned he felt to his husband’s touch, breathless with the possibilities it brought to mind. It was as if the world shrank to just the two of them, all else rendered incidental, unimportant. “Though perhaps a Ravenstag hunts, after all... or is hunted in turn.”

Hannibal grinned, his gloved hand spreading behind Will’s shoulder blade, his fingers cupping ever so slightly in a caress. The shoes Will wore made him even with his husband in height, something Hannibal noted with pleasure as it put Will’s luscious mouth so perfectly level with his own.

“Hunter or hunted, I intend to enjoy the result,” Hannibal said, dancing him to the opposite end of the room.

“And what will you give me if I catch you?” Will asked, his pleasure in their game rising, leaving him elated. He felt he had exchanged himself for a Courtier in truth and played the role now gleefully, fully enjoying the freedom of it.
Hannibal chuckled, and feigned consideration. “A title?”

“Heavens, no, I have one of my own,” Will said, his laughter throaty and quick. He shifted in Hannibal's arms, pressing just a touch closer. “This country is awash in such useless things.”

“Then jewels, perhaps?” Hannibal pressed, tipping his mouth nearer, his hand tightening on Will's own. “A diamond ring fit for a beauty such as yours?”

“There is a ring I would much prefer, should I find the giver in my favor. If you have jewels enough to impress me, sir,” Will said. “Then you should donate them to the charity.”

“What can impress you?” Hannibal asked, curling his tongue around one heavy fang. “Tell me and I will provide it.”

Will leaned close, so close their lips brushed, so close that for a dizzying moment Hannibal believed he might kiss him. “A glass of champagne is a good place to start,” Will whispered, and pulled away with a graceful bow when the waltz ended, leaving Hannibal staring after him.

It did not take his husband long to find him again, drawn like a magnet to where he stood once more firmly wedged into his group of young people, more a flock of noisy, colorful birds than ladies and gentleman. Will was aware of him in a way he was not aware of anyone else, as if the vibration of his breath and the weight of his gaze were invisible fingers on his skin, tugging and pulling him in his husband's direction like a compass pointing north.

Smiling, he turned to face the dancers, heart thundering in anticipation when he sensed Hannibal stop behind him. Two of the young ladies in Beverly's acquaintance stifled nervous giggles at Will's side, young and silly girls too excited for common sense to overrule their inexperience.

Will felt a warm puff of breath against his ear just a split second before Hannibal's voice purred the Masquerade greeting, “Do I know you?”

The fine hairs on Will's nape lifted in response and a shiver coursed through him, pooling in his belly with heat. “You do not know me, sir,” Will said, turning his head away to bare the slender length of his throat. “We are all strangers here.”

Hannibal leaned closer. The tip of his nose brushed the sensitive skin of Will's neck as he scented him, shocking and forward under any other circumstance, and when one of the girl's gasped, her friend pinched her soundly before drawing her away.

Will flipped open his fan and lifted it, blocking the action from other curious, sheltered eyes. His lips parted on a soft sound he was barely able to restrain and his eyes widened for a split second before his lids fell, his nerves singing to the brief sensation.

“I am certain I could never mistake such a pleasing scent,” Hannibal said, straightening and stepping close to Will's side, unable to get the little minx to look at him.

“And have you scented so many in public, sir?” Will asked, fluttering the fan to cool himself, playing the coquette in full honor of his costume.

“Only the one who pleases me most. Let me look at you properly,” Hannibal said, swinging around to his other side before Will could move away. He swept Will's free hand up in his and lifted his arm, baring him to his sight despite the press of the crowd.

He was speechless for a moment with appreciation as he looked at his mate and the exquisite way in which he wore his Courtier costume. The cinch of his waist seemed minuscule below the admirable breadth of his shoulders, all of which the floor-length, skirt-like jacket only emphasized. The way his coat flared made the most of his beautiful build and the trim, subtle curve of his hips. The small ruffles at his knees, the frothing lace that edged his jacket, the embroidery worked with pearls and stones all topped with the half-mask of a snarling wolf created a vision Hannibal marveled over.

“You are staring, sir,” Will said, chin tipping up as if he expected censure.

“I cannot help myself,” Hannibal admitted, his charm temporarily derailed by the sight of his mate in Omegan clothing. He turned Will by his hand to get a better look at him, eyes widening when his gaze was snared once more by Will's muscular, graceful legs starkly on display in his patterned white stockings, by how his long feet arched in those low-heeled shoes.
Hannibal had never wanted to kiss a pair of shoes before, but he felt a sudden urge to.

“You look absolutely exquisite,” he breathed, even as the analytical part of his mind delighted in the fact that Will had chosen pearls and pastels, while he himself had gone with black and gold. Even apart, they complemented one another, and that thrilled him to the tips of his aristocratic toes. “I shall have to order you another wardrobe.”

“That is a very forward thing to say to someone you do not know,” Will told him, smiling. The paint on his lips had worn off, but had stained them a deep crimson red, delectable and full.

“I would know you anywhere,” Hannibal said, pulling Will's gloved hand to his lips to kiss his knuckles, grazing his teeth over the thin, fine material to satisfy his urge to taste his beautiful mate. “Your eyes, your smile, your posture, the tilt of your head and the way you breathe. The curve of your hip and the dip of your back. From the tips of your curls to the curl of your toes, I would know you.”

He straightened and pulled Will closer, unmindful of their audience, trying and failing to remain inconspicuous in their observations.

“When we are apart, I am missing a piece of myself,” Hannibal said, murmuring the words against Will's lips, the confession for his ears alone. “By my own completion, I know you.”

Will's smile softened and his gaze fell, a peek of the shy youth within who was touched by Hannibal's words. He dropped his fan to dangle by its silken cord from his slender wrist and trailed his fingertips against Hannibal's jaw in a light caress.

“Are you always so forward, sir?” he asked, enjoying the fact that his touch made Hannibal's amber eyes shutter half closed in pleasure.

“When there is a kiss from my brilliant spouse at stake, yes,” Hannibal said, flashing his heavy fangs in a grin. “Yes, I most certainly am.”

Will chuckled, and from the way he tilted his head, Hannibal knew one of those disapproving eyebrows was cocked over one wry blue eye.

“I have something for you,” Hannibal told him, turning back to the pedestal where he had placed the two flutes of champagne. He plucked the slender glasses up and offered one to Will. “I propose a toast.”

“A toast to what?” Will asked, lifting his glass in anticipation.

“To new beginnings,” Hannibal said, and tapped the rim of his flute against Will's before lifting the glass to his lips.

“I can drink to that,” Will said, and swallowed down the sweet champagne, grateful for the relief of the cool alcohol in his parched throat.

“And so I have won your little challenge,” Hannibal said, putting his empty cup on the tray of passing staff. “Have I not?”

“Catch me for a kiss, if you can,” Will reminded him, depositing his own glass to free his hands and easing away. “You have found me, but as a fisherman I know too well never to count it a catch until you've landed your fish, and you have by no means landed me, my Lord.”

He turned on his heel, and Hannibal stared after him, struck for a moment by the beautiful sight of the coat floating out behind him like a billow of gathered, cascading skirts, by the lacing of a thick satin ribbon down his long back that drew the whole ensemble tight around his trim body.

“Have you come for a dance, Lord Clarges?” one of the girls dared to ask, wide-eyed and brave from too much champagne.

“My deepest apologies to such a striking Swan, my dear, but there is only one here with whom I will dance,” Hannibal said, eliciting a few appreciative whispers from Beverly's friends. “If you will excuse me...”

Will cast a look back over his shoulder as he moved towards the dance floor and Hannibal came after him, more than content to chase him forever if needs be, if only to have his sight filled with nothing but his mate.

Hannibal was determined that Will not find fault in their evening. They danced for hours without pause, though it only felt like moments. When Will grew flushed and breathless, Hannibal escorted him away from the dance floor and settled him comfortably in one of the many little chairs ringing the walls of the Colosseum, leaving him with the promise of fetching him something cool to drink.
Pleasantly sore and somewhat warm, Will smoothed the flounced fall of his skirt-like jacket and sighed, eyes closing to enjoy the music, a slight smile on his lips.

“May I join you?”

Will opened his eyes to find a woman before him, smiling down at him from behind her elaborate mask, most of her admirable shape exposed in her exquisitely tailored dress. Will felt his cheeks heat up just looking at her, but he said, “Yes, of course.”

She seated herself next to him, fanning them both with her gilt, lace fan. The smooth curves of her mask, which wore the implacable expression of a goddess, were in stark contrast to the red mouth below, which cut sharply from her glistening skin with firm strokes of paint.

“Do I know you?” Will asked, opting to fan himself and turning just a hair away from her.

“No, I don’t suppose you do. I can’t imagine Lord Clarges would discuss me,” she said, the sigh in her voice drawing Will’s eyebrows down. She tilted her head his way to judge his reaction before looking him over.

“Why should he not?” Will asked, cocking his head, a slight smile on his lips.

“Our relationship isn’t one meant for polite conversation,” he was told, and she fanned herself more vigorously as if embarrassed.

“My conversations with Lord Clarges are rarely polite,” Will said, enjoying her discomfit as much as the way she turned an annoyed look at him. He knew very well what conclusions she wanted him to draw, and knew very well that they were untrue. Hannibal had told Will the names of the women he had erred with; Will had insisted on it and been told without compunction. One lived in Lietuva—his mother’s homeland where he had visited his grandparents four years before—and the other had moved to the Continent with her husband less than a month after their single night together.

“I am intimately acquainted with his tastes...” she let the inference hang in the air and smiled.

“That certainly sounds intriguing,” Will admitted, unable to resist baiting her somewhat, galling woman that she was. “I know a little of his tastes, but not very much. Would you tell me?”

“Tell you?” she echoed, shocked by his request.

“Yes,” Will said, turning to give her the whole of his attention. “A gentleman’s tastes must be accommodated at all times, so I have been told.”

“They certainly should!” she stammered, looking around for some distraction with which to rescue herself.

“Indeed they must,” Will said, thoroughly amused. He settled back in his chair, grateful for the corset supporting his frame as his body reminded him of the fall he had taken. “I find that I must know his... predilections in order to best please him.”

She sat up straighter, surprise lighting her eyes, but she said, “Of course!”

“Will you share them with me?” he pressed, watching the flustered panic rise in her eyes. “What does he desire first thing in the morning?”

“I—”

“And in the afternoon? He has such a prodigious appetite,” Will said, fanning himself. “I fear I am falling short, lacking that which he is used to.”

He dropped a meaningful glance at her figure and she squeaked, hand flying to rest over her bosom.

“W—well, I would suggest—”

“I do understand, however, that your relationship is in the past,” Will said, overriding her hesitant offer. “I am sure you did all that you could. It certainly isn’t your fault that his tastes changed. He is a man, and a fickle one at that, and some things lose their charm with familiarity.”

“May I assume that you are speaking of me?” Hannibal inquired, approaching with two glasses in hand.

Will smiled and turned, reaching for the glass of ratafia Hannibal held out to him. He saw Hannibal’s gaze land on the woman next to him, but there was no spark of recognition in his eyes, merely curiosity.

“Have you been gathering more admirers in my absence?” Hannibal asked, sipping from his own glass, though he found the stuff to be useless for anything but washing pans.

“You’re just in time, Lord Clarges,” Will said, turning an expansive smile on the woman next to him. “I was just having the most delightful conversation! You will never guess who has come this evening! It is your former cook!”
Hannibal paused in the process of sipping his drink, confusion evident when the woman gasped in outraged horror at Will's side.

“My cook?”

“Yes,” Will said, reaching out to lay a gloved hand on her arm. “I know it isn’t done to speak in public of these things, but she was telling me all about your tastes! What happy circumstances these are, to find someone so well acquainted with what you desire!”

“Indeed,” Hannibal said, feeling somewhat sorry for her, whoever she was. It was no easy thing running afoul of his mate and she clearly had not known what she was getting into.

“I was just telling my new acquaintance how unfortunate it is,” Will said, sipping his drink with delicacy, “that you have lost your taste for melons.”

Hannibal choked on his drink and coughed, forced to put it down entirely to clear his lungs.

“Yes,” he managed, stifling another cough. “Indeed, I have lost my taste for melons.”

“Speaking of,” Will said, turning his attention back to her. “Your costume is quite daring. It certainly makes the most of your lovely figure.”

“Thank you,” she said, somewhat dazed and looking for a way out of whatever she had managed to get herself into.

“Oh, but thank you very much for seeking me out,” Will told her. “You should call on our present cook at Chelsea House. Perhaps something in your experience could sate my husband’s peculiar tastes.”

She summoned a faint laugh and stood, saying with stiff discomfort, “I will be sure to do so. If you will excuse me?”

When she vanished into the crowd, Hannibal looked down at his mate and asked, “Melons?”

“She was very determined that I know her relationship with you,” Will said, chuckling.

“My cook?” Hannibal asked, laughing. “You truly are dangerous, Will.”

“Far less so when I am not provoked so recklessly,” Will said, standing to straighten his jacket.

He was just about to ask Hannibal to dance again when he was distracted by another voice saying, “Quick! Lord Clarges!”

“Miss Katz!” Hannibal said, holding out his hand for her, which she took to come near, hissing to Will, “Ask me to dance!”

“B—”

“Goodness! This is turning out to be a crush! Heavens! Excuse me! Excuse me!”

“Quick, before he catches up,” Bev said, abandoning Hannibal’s hand for Will’s. “Dance with me!”

Will laughed but hesitated, looking to Hannibal. It was not permission he looked for, just reassurance, which he found in Hannibal’s smile and slight nod towards the dance floor.

Hannibal watched them go, Wolf and Pirate, vanishing into the crowd while Mr. Katz, his portly bulk in no way aided by the panniers of his Lady-in-Waiting costume, came tripping towards him.

“My goodness! Lord Clarges, is that you?” he asked, his mustache rather incongruous on his powdered face. “What a frightening mask you have! Have you seen my daughter?”

“She is dancing with my husband,” Hannibal said, feeling safe enough to return to his drink without asphyxiating himself.

Will certainly was dangerous, even when he didn’t mean to be.

“I was very surprised to hear you came!” Mr. Katz said, yanking on his skirt with aggravation and cursing at it. “How in the seven hells people wear these without risking life and limb is entirely beyond me!”

“Will needed some entertainment and it is for a good cause,” Hannibal said, compelled to assist him to sit before he lost his entire skirt to the uncaring crowd. “On the subject of causes, we saw soldiers heading south. What news is there from the Ministry?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry business!” Mr. Katz lamented, fanning himself furiously, his wig askew. “We lost the port and they have taken back Ostham. The Ministry decided to lay siege.”

“Was it unanimous?” Hannibal asked, concern pushing back against the enjoyment of his evening.

“No, it was not, but it will happen nonetheless,” Mr. Katz said. He picked up Will’s glass and drained it, heaving an unhappy sigh. “The Merchants’ Guild has been advocating for a treaty. This cannot continue on. This must be settled! Lord Rathmore—”

“Lord Rathmore?” Hannibal asked, startled to hear Mina’s husband mentioned.
“Yes, the prancing little—beg your pardon, my Lord,” Mr. Katz said, remembering himself, but Hannibal waved it away, more interested in what he had to say than in his apology. “Lord Rathmore sits on the Ministry now. His father got him appointed. It seems he needed something useful to do, and now he is playing at war.”

“A man who has never been to war is making decisions for those who must go to war?” Hannibal said, flummoxed and appalled.

“My sentiments precisely,” Mr. Katz said, sour. “Unlike yourself, Lord Clarges, who has served very valiantly in their Majesties' military, Rathmore would rather be in charge than be in danger. He's here tonight, should you like to call him down.”

“I might yet,” Hannibal murmured, still puzzling over such a man taking a seat on a military council. “What does Bert think?”

“His Highness,” Mr. Katz said, repressive in his tone, “thinks we need the treaty. He is firmly in our corner.”

“He never was one for conflict,” Hannibal said, amused at being reprimanded even so gently by Mr. Katz.

“He's here, too, you know,” Mr. Katz said, dropping into a hushed whisper. “Somewhere about. He told me he intended to be here and I strongly encouraged him—very strongly encouraged him, my Lord—not to do something so entirely reckless!”

“Entirely reckless is his stock in trade,” Hannibal said, grinning at the thought of the youngest royal nephew wandering the ballroom, standing out like a drunk in a Cenobium, given his usual high spirits. “Have no fear on his behalf, Mr. Katz. Bert is a soldier first and royal only by the skin of his teeth, as he will not hesitate to remind you.”

“My Lord, just because he is a man of the people does not mean we can speak so freely—”

“I would always have you speak so freely, Katz!”

Hannibal glanced over and grinned, the familiar voice recognized easily once he saw the man before him. He was, amusingly enough, dressed as a Ram and every bit as conspicuous as Hannibal had known he would be.

“Your—”

“Don’t,” the Ram said, holding up a warning hand to Mr. Katz to cut off the greeting as well as his attempt to rise. “You’ll give me away! I don’t even carry a damned title, Katz, honestly!”

Mr. Katz wobbled in consternation, his manners at war with the request.

“I should like to have a dance, if your card isn’t full?” the Ram inquired, grinning when Mr. Katz furiously fanned himself.

He shifted his attention to Hannibal and said, “So you are the lauded paramour of our beautiful Wolf?”

“And you are here without your father’s blessing and,” Hannibal said with a telling glance around, “without your usual cohorts.”

“They wouldn’t be caught at a charity ball,” he was told. “And they would give me away in heartbeat! I spend quite enough time shuttered away in boredom, thank you. That aside, I am here on business. I wanted to hear for myself what people were saying about the war and have some discussions incognito.”

“As if everyone here doesn’t know who you are,” Hannibal said, noting the way they were watched. Mr. Katz was fanning himself fit to start a gale-force wind and still made no dent in his nerves, as if an assassin might pop out of the crowd to murder the King’s least and most distant relative who had no hope or ambition in gaining the throne.

“You come dressed as a Ram? Very fitting,” Hannibal said, tipping his glass in appreciation.

“A Stag even more so,” was the quick retort. “Or are you a hart for the sake of your Wolf?”

Hannibal just laughed, withholding his answer as the Ram turned to say, “Mr. Katz, I am having difficulty placing your costume...”

“I can tell you where I will be placing it,” Mr. Katz said, gaining his feet with caution and shaking out his skirts. “The nearest rubbish pile should do!”

“Well, you look lovely. I was hoping I would run into you,” the Ram said. “We have some business to discuss regarding the Merchants’ Guild. But that can wait for now.”

He turned his amused gaze on Hannibal and said, “I certainly didn’t fancy meeting you here, though. You never attend these sorts of things.”
“No, nor would I, but my Wolf had the desire to see the costumes and I find I cannot refuse him,” Hannibal said, his eyes searching out his mate on the dance floor, expertly moving through the steps of the quadrille with Ms. Katz, laughing with abandon as he danced with nimble grace.

He grinned at the way Will expertly flipped the frothy, layered tails of his coat when he moved, as if the gesture was second nature to him already. Omegan dress truly suited him, Hannibal observed. If Will would allow it, he would indeed buy him an entire wardrobe in such a style.

Two, even. And perhaps some traditionally-female wear, also, in case he might like to try it.

He would have to have Will's dressing room expanded at once.

“I imagine you can refuse him very little. Ah, a new mistress after all these years, though you surprise me with your choice,” the Ram mused, chuckling when Mr. Katz gasped in horror at his mistake. “Not that I don't see the draw. He's fetching and very sharp.”

“Mind that he doesn't cut you,” Hannibal warned. “He is never unarmed and quite Uncommon. But he is not my mistress.”

“This is a highly irregular conversation!” Mr. Katz announced, using his fan to separate himself from it, his eyes darting around to see if anyone was eavesdropping.

The Ram cocked his head, ignoring Mr. Katz' offended sensibilities, a sly smile curving his lips. “No? The ballroom rumor has named him so. Arriving in the ducal coach all alone... and we know well enough that your grandfather hasn't taken a lover in thirty years. So who is he, then? Your secret is safe with me, provided you keep mine.”

He sent Hannibal a smug, questioning look and lifted his glass to take a swallow.

“He's my spouse,” Hannibal said, enjoying the way he choked on his drink and lost his composure coughing, pleased that he could be as dangerous as his husband when it suited him.

“No, I'm fine, I'm fine,” the Ram said, waving Mr. Katz away when he made to pound him on the back. “You're having me on! After all these years? And your... oddness?”

“Yes, after all of these years,” Hannibal said, refusing to let his joy be soured by references to his past behaviors. “My oddness has been well and thoroughly cured. He has no tolerance for nonsense.”

“How on earth did he get it out of you?” the Ram asked, the words spoken in laughter.

Hannibal leaned a bit closer to him and confided, “With a trout.”

“A tr—”

“Don't ask,” Hannibal warned, and handed his glass off to Mr. Katz, who had no qualms finishing it off. “When you meet him, you will understand. Isn't that right, Mr. Katz?”

Mr. Katz nodded, eager to move the conversation to something more acceptable, and gushed, “He is the most delightful young man! And he fishes!”

“I have met him,” the Ram said, casting an appreciative look at Hannibal's spouse that he decided to tolerate. Will was garnering quite a few of those this evening, and Hannibal preened as if they were directed at him, instead, bursting with pride for his mate. “I asked him to dance with me when he first arrived.”

“I am trying to imagine how that went, given what passes for your attempts at charm,” Hannibal said, and was not disappointed when the Ram said, “He told me he wasn’t interested in me, then slapped me with his fan and ordered me to stay to see if I could learn as fast as a dog.”

“He went easy on you. You're very lucky it was only a fan,” Hannibal said, laughing. “For someone so delicate and small, he is remarkably strong.”

Mr. Katz sputtered, then cocked his head in Hannibal's direction, looking entirely at a loss. “Delicate?”

“And small?” the Ram echoed, looking from Hannibal to Will, who was clapping at the close of the dance, a wide smile on his full lips. “Your spouse?”

“Who else?” Hannibal asked, and sighed, watching him with satisfaction.

“Yes, well, I cannot argue that he is most agreeable,” Mr. Katz said, grasping for words that would not offend. “He does have a fineness of feature that is very pleasant. He is very clearly of noble birth and it certainly does show—”

“You do realize he's nearly as large as you are, Hannibal?” the Ram said, able to plow ahead where Mr. Katz could only tiptoe. “And you are no small man.”
“What? Nonsense! He's much smaller than I!”

“Nonsense nothing, he is,” the Ram said, torn between amusement and horror at his perception. “Hannibal, he certainly isn't delicate! He's nearly as broad in the shoulders as you are and almost as tall. He could snap me in half like a twig if his temper was up.”

“You exaggerate,” Hannibal said, turning his offended stare on the man next to him. “He would never snap anyone in half like a twig!”

“Gentlemen,” Mr. Katz said, a pleading note in his voice. “This is not—”

“Honesty!” the Ram said, ignoring the call to wiser topics. “He's quite a brawny young man.”

“We must agree to disagree,” Hannibal said with a sniff of disdain for his friend's poor opinion. “Farm hands are brawny. My mate is an ethereal beauty born of elemental grace—he most certainly is nothing like brawny.”

“He looks you in the eye when you dance and could strangle a man with his thighs,” the Ram commented. Hannibal was certain that Mr. Katz contemplated a swoon at that, but he only swayed a bit, horrified. “Which is not an altogether unhappy prospect, considering.”

“My husband is far too refined to strangle anyone with his thighs,” Hannibal said, considering the legs in question, which were lovely and muscular and all that they should be. “Though it is, indeed, not an unhappy prospect. He is small, and fragile, and wondrously brilliant and has no need to use his thighs for such things.”

“I could think of some uses for them if you can't,” the Ram said, chuckling at Mr. Katz' soft noise of dismay. “But he does cut a handsome figure, my friend, and I admit I have done my share of admiring him. He has an incredibly diverting shape, not to mention his beautiful neck.”

“Keep on like that and I'll see you at dawn with pistols,” Hannibal warned. “Be sure to invite your wife. I'm sure she'd love to see me drop you. You always were as terrible a shot as you were a student.”

“I need another drink,” Mr. Katz murmured, despairing of their choice in conversation.

“Which was to your benefit on all counts,” the Ram said to Hannibal, shaking his head. “Bring him to court.”

“If he wishes,” Hannibal said, turning his attention back to his spouse. “He is very industrious and keeps himself occupied. He has very little time for frivolity.”

“And has no tolerance for nonsense, which we are, unfortunately, stuffed full of,” the Ram said. “But then, you never were one for court life.”

“Court does not appeal to me any more than it does to you,” Hannibal said. “And until my duties as Duke require it, I will gladly keep clear of it, and of you, Your H—”

“Don't,” he was warned, and subsided with a grin. “I will thrash you, scandal be damned.”

“You could try,” Hannibal said, amused. “Though my spouse would take exception and, believe me, you do not want to aggravate him.”

The Ram laughed, thoroughly pleased, and offered his arm to Mr. Katz, who took it with another dangerous wobble.

“If you'll excuse us,” the Ram said, amusement floating in his voice. “This lovely lady and I have some business to discuss.”

“Best of luck to you both,” Hannibal said, turning his attention back to Will. “I trust between you, you will manage to ensure I am not forced to abandon my wondrous little Wolf for foreign shores.”

“We will do our very best, my Lord,” Mr. Katz said, and was tugged out to the dance floor with a little yip of dismay, leaving Hannibal thoughtful and somewhat strained behind him.

It was a night Will knew he would remember forever, not for its grandeur or the exciting sights he never dreamed he would see, or those rare dances he danced with Bev, or the champagne he took in moderation but always with a smile. He would remember it forever for the way Hannibal held him when they danced, the way he would lean to whisper a soft tease in Will's ear as they changed partners, the way he would bring something cool for him to drink when he returned from the floor on another's arm. He would remember forever the sight of Hannibal in stark black and gold, a fanciful imagining of the soldier's uniform he'd worn to battle with pride, in the regal mask of a Ravenstag which transformed him into a supple forest god.
But mostly he would remember it for the way that Hannibal looked at him, bold and unashamed, pride shining in his amber eyes as if Will was the most glorious thing he had ever chanced to behold.

And for the night, he was. He spoke without hesitation to those who gathered to join their party, secure behind the shelter of his mask and protected by the presence of his husband. He laughed and debated and drew his own little crowd of motley admirers, much to Hannibal's indulgent amusement. He was free for just one night to be who he might have been had his life taken another course and he took full advantage of it, knowing it would vanish like fog in the morning sun.

Yet, as the hour grew late, Will found himself tiring despite the excitement. Beverly's group of friends, many of whom Will had partnered through the evening, were bright and cheerful company, whereas those in Hannibal's acquaintance were more serious and prone to deeper discussions, but he wanted neither. His head was beginning to spin from the chatter and gossip and noise, and he found himself wishing for Hannibal's warm scent and the comfort of his touch as he returned from the dance floor, only to find Hannibal was not among their gathered group.

Will headed around the ballroom in search of him, ears perking when he heard Lord Rathmore mentioned by name. Hannibal had told him that his brother-in-law was in attendance, but he had not been able to locate him. He thought it somewhat odd that Timothy would not seek him out, if only to have word of his wife, and found himself eavesdropping despite himself, his curiosity unwilling to pass it by.

“... up to his eyebrows in debts, is what I was told,” a woman was saying, her stage whisper carrying despite her efforts.

The two women with her, masks pushed atop their heads, made an attentive audience. One of them eagerly offered what she had heard, not even bothering to whisper, “So it is Lady Rathmore after all? Scandalous! First that actor, and now her brother-in-law!”

“Gods know it wouldn't be his wife,” the other said, and they all tittered, fanning themselves and quite pleased with their ugly gossip.

“Hear tell he was at the Dimmond Garden Party. Cold as a grave, they say. With a mate like stone, it's no wonder he's chased himself up the sister's skirts!”

Will drew closer slowly, drawing a deep breath to calm himself.

“Still, to chop her beautiful hair—”

“I beg your pardon, ladies,” Will said, noting how the froze when they saw him there. He inclined his head to them, little though they deserved it, and said, “I believe you are gossiping about my sister.”

“Yes,” Will said. “The Lady Rathmore, my sister, who you seem to believe is here this evening? Compliments of my husband, was it?”

“Yes,” Will said. “The Lady Rathmore, my sister, who you seem to believe is here this evening? Compliments of my husband, was it?”

“M-my Lord, we—”

“I do not want excuses, ladies, nor apologies which carry no weight,” Will said, troubled. “What I do want, however, is for you to hold your peace on the subject of my sister, whose affairs are entirely her own business and none of yours. Do not connect her in so unseemly a fashion with my own husband, who has been good enough to bring me here despite his own reluctance, no doubt knowing better than I what manner of company I might expect!”

Silence greeted him, shocked and ashamed.

“If you have paid one moment's attention, then you have seen for yourself how my husband indulges me,” Will said, softening his tone some. “And knowing now that I am the brother, and not the sister, then you understand your gossip is entirely baseless, do you not?”

“We do, my Lord,” came the prompt reply, the other woman nodding with vehemence, the third on the verge of a distressed Moment.

“Whatever this conjecture is regarding Lord Rathmore's fortunes, or lack of such, it is entirely unrelated to my husband or myself,” Will pressed, insistent on that point, though resolving to find out for himself the state of his sister's fortune. “Please refrain from speaking so unkindly regarding those whom you do not know, for fear your behavior will prevent you an opportunity to better yourself through their acquaintance.”
He turned away without acknowledging their stammering apologies, satisfied he had made his point and refusing to allow the exchange to ruin his evening. He resumed his search for Hannibal and finally managed to catch the barest flash of gold across the room from the corner of his eye.

He stretched up, catching Hannibal's eye, his annoyance and irritation evaporating when his husband drew back into the crowd and vanished out onto the terrace beyond an open archway.

Will followed with a small smile, wondering what his husband was up to. He fanned himself until he reached the terrace and the cold, foggy night air blew against him in a heavenly caress after the heated squeeze of the ballroom. The terrace, however, was empty, giving him only a view of the city below through a haze of fog and misty lights.

Will dropped his fan and tipped his head to the cool air, sighing with relief but wondering where on earth his husband had gone off to.

“You seem as if you are enjoying yourself.”

Will turned to find Hannibal leaning against the building in the shadows, watching him.

“I am,” he confirmed, relieved that he was here, after all. “And what of you, sir?”

“I find that the sight of my mate laughing and delighted is quite possibly the most fascinating thing I have ever beheld,” Hannibal said, pushing away from the wall to draw closer. “Even when he is not dancing with me.”

Will cocked his head, encouraged by his words. “It would be rude to refuse to dance with those who asked.”

Hannibal held out his hand, then, and said, “Will you dance with me now?”

“Here?” Will asked, laughing softly but intrigued. Never one to resist a challenge, he put his hand in Hannibal's and allowed himself to be pulled close.

The music was muted by distance and the roar of the crowd within, but the steady thump of their hearts beat a rhythm made just for them and they swayed softly to it, gazing at one another in the moonlight.

“You're hold is quite irregular, sir,” Will whispered, his hand resting on Hannibal's arm, which wrapped his waist with a possessiveness that was not at all unpleasant.

“The effect you have on me is even more so,” Hannibal murmured, squeezing him just a bit closer. “I have never been so desperate for another's touch, so filled with joy at the sight of another's smile. I have never longed so deeply for anything than I have longed to simply watch you, Will, and enjoy the world through your delight. For the first time in my life, I clearly understand what it means to value another over oneself and find satisfaction in giving rather than taking.”

Will swallowed hard, releasing a soft, embarrassed laugh. “You flatter me, sir, I—”

“It is no flattery, Will,” Hannibal whispered, bringing him to a stop there in the small pocket of privacy of the terrace, his hands warm on Will's skin and his eyes alight with hunger. “You're unmaking me, knot by knot, bit by bit.”

He shifted, drawing Will's hand to his chest and settling in there, pressed flat over his heart. Will could feel the steady thunder within, picking up and racing at his touch.

“And what am I making of you, Hannibal?” he asked, lifting his gaze, his head tilting ever so slightly.

“A man,” Hannibal told him, his lips whispering over Will's, the soft exhale of his breath tickling over his skin.

Will closed his eyes, a fine tremble of anticipation sweeping through him. He slid his hand from Hannibal's heart to his jaw, cupping his face. His breath picked up in response to the sudden quickening of his pulse and he wet his lower lip with the bare tip of his tongue, impatient and nervous and elated.

Hannibal's gloved fingers curled beneath his chin, urging his head up. Will's breath escaped in a rush when Hannibal nuzzled him there, just beneath his jaw, drawing in his scent like fine perfume.

“What you do to me,” Hannibal whispered, mouth and tongue whispering over Will's skin, tasting the salt of his sweat and the flavor of his scent at long last. Will shuddered in his arms and it woke something primal in Hannibal to feel his mate so moved. He pulled Will tighter to him, grazing a kiss up the curve of his jaw to find the delicate lobe of his ear. He drew it between his teeth in a gentle bite, shuddering when Will's sturdy, perfect body arched up from instinct, a soft gasp escaping him. “You have no idea what you do to me...”

“I'm starting to,” Will breathed, tipping his head when Hannibal's hand swept down his neck, the leather of his gloves slick and warm on his skin. He was glassy-eyed and flushed when Hannibal drew back just enough to look at him. His full mouth curved into a smile and he warned, "Do not ask me, Hannibal..."
“As you are my husband,” Hannibal purred, backing Will against the balustrade. “I will do as you say...”

“Then kiss me,” Will told him, the long hours of dancing, of being so aware of one another, of touch and scent all wearing his patience to a thread that snapped beneath the press of his husband’s warm lips.

This wasn’t a night for hesitance. Their kiss beneath the afternoon sun had been gentle and warm and careful. Their kiss beneath the moonlight was fierce, hungry, and insistent, daring in the place of caution, bolstered by a night of joy and wrapped in the surety of shared delight.

Will returned every stroke of Hannibal’s tongue, every nibble of teeth, every teasing suck, shuddering at the way his husband groaned in response, pushing harder against him in a blatant display that thrilled Will more than shocked him. His breath came out in a rush when Hannibal’s hand slid beneath his jacket, delving under his blouse.

When he touched the hard stays beneath, Hannibal moaned, “Is that a corset?”

The question was half lost in a gasp, in a drawn breath, in the way Will tugged on his lower lip with keen little teeth instead of answering him.

“Gods, what you do to me,” Hannibal breathed, his kisses deep and devouring but still gentle, still aware the coy Courtier in his arms was no more coached in seduction than he himself was.

But he certainly seemed to be making a go of it, with enough success Hannibal abandoned himself to his mate’s fevered kisses.

It was Will who eased back, tipping his chin to bare his throat. Hannibal delved beneath his jaw and rubbed his teeth over the sweet place where Will’s scent was strongest. Will purred with deep satisfaction, a soft vibration of sound exquisitely tuned to provoke an immediate and rather startling response from his husband.

“You are profoundly Uncommon, Will,” Hannibal said, the words shaky but full of contentment.

“And Confounding?” Will asked, a breathless whisper in his ear.

“And Unusual,” Hannibal murmured, grinning. “And entirely Unpredictable, especially when you are agitated.”

“I am not agitated at present, Lord Clarges, so you are quite safe,” Will told him, enjoying the way his skin prickled with sensation as Hannibal trailed a kiss up his cheek

“I must admit that I am,” Hannibal told him, chuckling. “I fear that I am in no state to return to the ballroom.”

Will blinked, then blushed, but he didn’t pull away. He was certainly feeling rather appreciative himself, though it was tempered somewhat with his nerves.

“Given the circumstances, neither am I,” Will said, catching his breath with difficulty. “And you claim you have no interest in carnal pursuits, my Lord.”

“No more interest than you have in kisses, my Lord,” Hannibal murmured into his ear, grinning at the breathless way Will laughed.

“I am beginning to see their appeal,” Will told him, leaning back, though he stayed pressed belly to belly to his husband. He looked out over the city, content to be there looking down at the soft glow of the lamps and haze of the fog with Hannibal’s arm tight around his waist. He could not imagine feeling more at peace than he was in this moment, his worries and cares a lifetime away and unable to harm him, a possible future he could hardly dare to hope for.

The great clock struck the hour, the chime faint but clear.

“Three o’clock,” Hannibal said, nuzzling the delicate ear peeking out from Will’s curls. “There will be dinner soon, if you wish to stay.”

Will smiled, eyes half closing when his husband scented him again, drawn over and over to his throat in search of what was normally so elusive. He realized just how tired he was now that the Courtier had left him, burned away from the heat of Hannibal’s kisses to leave him just himself again.

Perhaps something at Chelsea House? Provided your agitation subsides?” he asked, the suggestion shy and soft, vulnerable in the aftermath of exposing himself so entirely. He felt his father’s censure like a storm banking on the horizon, a looming threat at the display he’d made of himself, both in his costume and in his husband’s arms. There was a quaver of uncertainty in his voice when he said, “I have enjoyed myself to exhaustion, it seems. I have risen this early, but never stayed up this late.”
Hannibal saw the hairline crack in him, the small ripple moving ahead of dreaded and unwelcome doubt. He refused to allow it, and kissed the corner of Will’s mouth, asking, “Have you danced holes in your shoes yet, my little Wolf?”

“Not quite as yet,” Will said, turning to face him, smiling when he was given another sweet, gentle kiss on his lips. It chased back the whisper of father’s voice and his own disbelief at the liberties he’d allowed Hannibal to take with him, in public no less. When Hannibal drew away, reluctant but resolute, Will said with cautious encouragement, “Perhaps next time, my Lord.”

It filled Hannibal with pleasure to hear him even hint at a future together, and he stepped back to give Will a graceful, albeit rather careful bow before he straightened and offered his arm.

“Then I shall escort you home, my Lord,” he said, and Will took his arm with a smile. “But you shall have to walk in front of me, Will, unless you prefer I make a spectacle of my—”

“Hannibal!”

Chapter 28

They managed to escape the ballroom without drawing too much attention and the coach was brought around for them with Hannibal’s mount tied behind, all but the coachman and a single footman sent home hours ago.

Will was handed into the coach and settled on the soft upholstery with a huff of relief, but he looked back at the Colosseum with a fond smile, humming softly under his breath.

“You’re near done in, aren’t you?” Hannibal asked, moving to sit across from him. He reached down and hefted Will’s feet into his lap, steadying him as the coach shifted into motion.

“I have never felt so exhausted, but pleasantly so,” Will said, querying, “What are you doing?” when Hannibal slid his buckled shoes off.

His only answer was to have the gentle, expert press of thumbs on the aching ball of one foot and Will sighed heavily, unable to muster the affront to scold him.

“Nice?” Hannibal asked, rubbing Will’s supple foot in both hands, smiling when he spread his toes. He teased a finger into a hole in his stocking, saying, “Well, holes this far, anyway.”

“I shall have to wheedle my husband to replace them,” Will murmured, his tired smile unguarded and sweet, the street lamps revealing his expression in a flare of soft golden light.

“I have it on good authority he is prepared to buy out the store,” Hannibal said, working on his other foot as well, taking the occasional sidetrack down to his slender ankles just because they were so temptingly near.

Will chuckled, his head lolling against the seat, his eyes slit nearly closed with exhaustion and enjoyment as Hannibal worked on his feet.

“Thank you, Hannibal,” he said, the words slipping out of him almost on accident, an exhale of appreciation.

“For what?” Hannibal asked, intent on his task but looking up to catch a glimpse of Will’s face in the passing lights.

He seemed sad again, reflective, and Hannibal paused in his work, just holding Will’s ankles in his strong hands. “Will?”

“For acknowledging I have a right to choose,” Will whispered, his gaze dropping just a little. “For not resenting me for it.”

“I have no reason to resent you in anything,” Hannibal said, resuming his gentle massage. “Although I wonder what you will think come morning...”

“What?” Will asked, coaxed from his tired thinking by the odd statement.

“Did you ever see Lord Rathmore?” Hannibal asked, bypassing the question Will asked.

Will shook his head, unseen in the darkness, and answered, “No, not once. But I did hear some unpleasant gossip about him... and us.”

“Us?”

“I heard a group of women saying that Lord Rathmore is drowning in debt,” Will said, stifling a yawn. “They seemed to think I was my sister, exchanging her actor for you.”
“That’s ridiculous,” Hannibal said, offended. “Your sister is nothing like you at all! Why must everyone see you in such an odd way? I had words with a friend of mine this evening on that very subject!”

“Words?” Will asked, diverted momentarily from the subject of his sister by Hannibal’s declaration. “What sort of words?”

“I was merely confirming that you are very small and delicate,” Hannibal said, transferring both hands to one foot where he worked out his wounded affront on Will’s aching instep, “and he had the audacity to say that you were... not.”

Will couldn’t contain his amusement. It was evident in his voice when he asked, “Why, what did your friend say?”

“He said you were as nearly as large as I am and could strangle a man with your thighs,” Hannibal informed him, hastily adding, “Which I will not argue the point, as your thighs are superior to those of any other and no doubt could easily squeeze the breath out of some lucky person, but I took exception to his saying you were brawny. I believe he was attempting to needle me, the bounder.”

“B-brawny?” Will asked, barely able to repeat the word, he was struggling so hard not to laugh, his husband’s ferocious vexation almost more than he could bear.

“Naturally, I corrected him,” Hannibal said, assuring Will as if he had any fears at all on that point. “I informed him that you are far too refined to strangle anyone with your thighs, that you are small, and fragile, and wondrously brilliant and have no need to use your thighs for such things.”

Will dissolved into throaty laughter, and said, “I wish I’d been there to hear that, Hannibal.”

“I was compelled to defend you against such obvious untruths,” Hannibal said, the smile teasing his lips proving he was striving to entertain. “You are very small, and very delicate, and nothing remotely like brawny.”

“I can’t imagine you thought me very delicate or small when I threw that crystal horse at you,” Will ventured, recalling that moment and the tumble on the carpet that had followed. “And I very nearly got the better of you on that rug.”

“You are resourceful and clever,” Hannibal said, refusing to be put off his perception. “Which easily explains it.”

“Then I suppose you could understand how people assumed I was my sister?” Will inquired, grinning.

“Not in the least!” Hannibal informed him. “How appalling! How could anyone imagine such a thing?”

“That is what I thought, considering I am bigger than she is.”

“Taller, perhaps,” Hannibal said, mouth pursing as he pictured them side by side and honestly admitted that Will was the larger of the two, though not by much. “And I will own that you might be a shade more muscular, but that is only because you are a man of activity and spend your time outdoors in energetic action. You are my beautiful Adonis.”

Will blushed at that but was flattered by the compliment and strangely pleased Hannibal was so inexplicably delighted by him.

“Your years of vigorous work at Hartford have indeed filled you out quite nicely,” Hannibal said, insisting Will be told the truth. “I cannot imagine your sister could carry that costume with anything near your natural grace and dignity.”

“Apparently, some could, and it seems Mina and I are identical to those who do not know us well,” Will reminded him, chuckling at Hannibal’s expression of pained disbelief revealed in a spill of light. “They thought she had cut off her hair and come this evening as your mistress.”

“There are so many troubling things in that statement I hardly know where to begin,” Hannibal told him. “Though I might start with their opinion of my good taste, if they think I would take your sister to my bed. Rest assured, everyone who is anyone knew I attended in the presence of my brilliant spouse.”

“Your brilliant spouse is apparently cold as a grave,” Will informed him, prodding him with his toes when Hannibal stopped, frozen with shock. “It seems reasonable that with a mate like stone you would ‘chase yourself up the sister’s skirts’.”

“Your sister,” Hannibal said, resuming his massage, “should return to her husband’s side straight away. Rumors like that have a tendency to take hold when particular situations encourage them.”

“It pains me to think you’re right,” Will said, earning himself a chuckle from his husband.

“Luckily it is a rare enough event not to cause you too much discomfort,” Hannibal teased.

Will subsided against the coach seat with a soft sigh, Mina’s situation intruding on his beautiful evening, insidious fingers of reality he wished he could ignore. “We know the truth, at least... but I do wonder if some of what I heard was the kernel of truth.”

“Meaning?”
“I wonder if Timothy has found himself impoverished by Mina's tastes,” Will said, troubled. He turned his cheek against the seat to look out at the passing city, still charmed by it despite the turn of his thoughts. “That would explain my sister's unexpected desire to ensconce herself at Hartford House.”

“I will withhold my ungenerous thoughts on that count,” Hannibal said, falling still with his hands resting on Will's ankles, the soft play of his fingers idle and soothing. “I have never understood her sudden interest.”

“She was frightened you intended to murder me,” Will said, swaying with the motion of the coach. “She only wanted to keep me safe... or so I thought. Perhaps it was something more desperate, after all.”

Hannibal frowned, contemplating for a moment before he offered, “I will make discreet inquiries into the matter, Will. If your sister is in need, I will not refuse to help her.”

“Thank you, Hannibal,” Will said, offering him a beauteous smile. “That is very thoughtful of you.”

“She is your sister,” Hannibal said, resisting the urge to heave a sigh. “I will do my best to care for her as you would wish. I am curious what became of the ladies who dared to say such things to you, however.”

“What could I have possibly done to them?” Will asked, hand curling over his heart as if shocked at the suggestion. “Small and delicate as I am?”

They were both laughing as the coach pulled up before Chelsea House. Hannibal slid his shoes back on him with a flourish that brought a grin to Will's mouth before he helped Will extract himself from the coach, careful of his jacket.

“I feel I could sleep for days,” Will breathed, leaning into Hannibal's warmth as they moved into the Townhouse, the footman scurrying ahead to light a lamp, which Hannibal took to see them upstairs.

“Then I would assume you are too tired for another waltz?” Hannibal asked, and Will's soft laughter filled the landing when Hannibal scooped one arm around his waist, half-waltzing him towards his room, humming a tune to mark time.

“My final waltz of the night,” Will said, breathless as they came to a halt at his door. He watched Hannibal by lamplight, sleepy and smiling as the door was opened and he was escorted inside.

Will moved to his bed and sat down with a yawn, hearing the low purr of his husband's voice when he gave instructions to the footman who had followed them up. Hannibal brought the lamp to Will's bedside table, a looming shadow in the darkness as he removed his gloves and tossed them down on Will's nightstand.

“It's so quiet,” Will said, holding still when Hannibal reached for him, teasing loose the knots that Jimmy had tied and freeing Will of his mask.

“If you can last a little longer, we could watch the sun come up,” Hannibal suggested, settling Will's mask to one side.

Will rubbed at his eye, slapping the hand that started loosening his jacket. “Mind yourself, Lord Clarges! Two kisses do not a promise make!”

“I could always wake Jimmy,” Hannibal said, kneeling between his spread knees to pull Will's shoes off and push them to one side. “Hold still.”

“I can undress myself,” Will reminded him, shrugging the frothy, beautiful coat off when Hannibal had the last of it undone. The cool air reached him through the thin material of his blouse and he sighed, distracted by how good it felt. Enough so that he didn't take immediate exception to his husband delving through the lace of his breeches to find his knee.

“You can,” Hannibal agreed, long fingers moving to loosening the ties that held the leg of Will's breeches closed to reach his stocking. He pushed the layers of lace up and back, following the trail of his stocking up over his knee until the blue silk garter ribbon was bared.

“Here, I—”

“No, allow me,” Hannibal said, finding the sight of Will's knee entirely diabolical in how benign it was pretending to be, when in fact it was a dangerous distraction of perfect shape and symmetry covered in smooth, pale silk and wrapped with a blue ribbon like the bow on a coveted gift.

“Shall I have it sent to its room with no supper?” Will inquired, leaning back on his palms with his head cocked in inquiry. Hannibal looked up, his hands cupped around Will's knee, thumbs stroking him through the stocking.

“You are glaring at my garter, sir,” Will told him, amusement twinkling in his eyes. “Has it offended you?”
“Only in that I do not see more of it,” Hannibal told him, and diverted his attention once more to unknot and undo the ribbon. “You are very dangerous, Will Graham. Even your knees are a menace to my stable thinking. I cannot imagine how little would get done in the world if knees such as this were on display.”

His gentle touch belied his scolding, fingers lingering as he rolled the silky material down over Will’s scandalous knee, down the muscular curve of his calf, and off of his lax foot.

“Then I will not allow them to beleaguer you a second time,” Will said on a soft laugh, moving to untie his other cuff and pluck the garter free.

“No, you will allow them to beleaguer me all they like, thank you very much!” Hannibal said, pushing his hands away. “It is my pleasure to pamper you.”

“You think I need pampering?” Will asked, watching as Hannibal removed his other stocking, this time daring to kiss his exposed knee and tickle his fingers up the sole of Will’s foot. “I was not pampered or spoiled enough to satisfy you?”

“No by half,” Hannibal said, tossing the little rolled stockings towards the wardrobe. “If I were to be daily driven from rational thought by the sight of your garters, Will, then I would count myself a lucky man.”

“I would never have thought to hear such a thing out of you, Hannibal Lecter,” Will said, catching his wrist and pushing back his cuff. He made a show of winding the blue garter ribbon around Hannibal’s wrist and tying it into a bold, tidy bow. “A favor to carry you through your daily battle with the sight of my knees.”

His soft, pleased laughter drew an answering chuckle from Hannibal, who admired the ribbon and even nuzzled it, sighing to find Will’s scent clinging to the silk.

“With such a favor, I surely cannot lose,” he said, grinning. “But now we reach the tricky part.”

“What tricky part is that?” Will asked, a little breathless when his husband loomed into his space, still masked and impressive, his strong hands slipping around Will’s slim waist to reach his back and pluck his blouse free from the top of his breeches.

“Freeing you from what is possibly the most titillating piece of clothing ever created to test one’s discipline,” Hannibal murmured, finding the lacing on the corset and loosening the knots.

Will smirked and reached up, undoing the ties on Hannibal’s Ravenstag mask to draw it free and set it aside.

The sight of his husband’s eyes ringed in black drew a soft, “oh,” from him, and he smiled, rubbing his thumb beneath one amber eye.

“Berger suggested it,” Hannibal said, teasing the lacing open. “So as to complete the illusion, as he said.”

Will’s hand fell to Hannibal’s jaw, thoughts heavy in his blue eyes.

“What are you thinking of?” Hannibal breathed, freeing the boned material and pulling it out from beneath Will’s thin blouse in a waft of his scent. It was hot and sweet and flooded Hannibal’s mouth with hunger. Something else stirred in response to his mate’s unique perfume, a bone-deep instinctive response that had never found an appropriate outlet, never been weathered or provoked as Nature intended. He could feel it there beneath the surface, slumberous but waking more with every breath.

It began to uncoil itself with more urgency when Will said, “I’m thinking of kissing you.”

Will took the corset from him and tossed it towards the wardrobe in a deft twist of his slender body. He turned back to Hannibal, his hand still firm on his jaw, and said, “I caught you, after all.”

“You did,” Hannibal said, reflexively wetting his lip in response to the suggestion and marveling that Will did not sense this sudden awakening.

Or perhaps he did. Perhaps, by the flush on his cheeks and the hazy desire in his eyes, something was rising within him, too, a silent response to one another pulling them further down the road of their blunted, stunted instincts.

“You caught me long before tonight, Will.”

It brought a soft chuff of pleased laughter from his mate and a smile, though he ducked his head, sudden nerves gripping him.

“If you are trying to flatter me, Lord Clarges,” Will said, tipping a shy look at him from under his lashes, sly and alert in the golden lamplight. “It’s working.”

“Good, because I mean every word of it...”
He trailed off when Will tipped his head up, claiming his mouth in a kiss that was demanding, encouraging, not in the least bit shy. He coiled against Hannibal and it was Hannibal who shifted to offer more of his mouth, more of himself, open and willing. Will's other hand rose and he gripped Hannibal's cheeks with both hands, pulling him close, his curiosity fueling him where inexperience betrayed him. The sheer innocent, seeking quality of his kisses made them all the more delectable and Hannibal settled in his grip, content to reap the rewards of Will's efforts and allow his mate to do as he pleased with him.

He would always allow Will to do as he pleased with him, he knew, and the understanding made those kisses so much sweeter.

A knock at the door parted them, breathless, flushed and half-embarrassed but smiling. There would be more kisses, more moments like this, and both of them were determined to savor things as they unfolded.

Hannibal pushed to his feet from where he was kneeling and answered the summons, blocking Will from view with his body. When he turned from the door he had a tray in hand, and nudged the panel closed with his booted foot.

“No dinner, sadly, but we are not entirely bereft of good food,” Hannibal told him, settling the tray on Will's vanity. He noticed the lacquered jewelry box then and paused.

'... keep it hidden, little faun... never tell him that you have it...'

“Where did this come from?” he asked, shock muting his voice. He sat the tray on the vanity and reached out as if he would touch the box before him, but stopped at the last second.

Will got to his feet, peering around him to see what Hannibal was referring to. He saw the box and recalled the journal, still tucked away out of view.

“It was in the closet,” he said, the tray of fruit and cheese and cold water momentarily forgotten. “Did you not have it put there?”

“No, I had no idea it was here,” Hannibal said, opening it carefully. He laughed, the sound soft and slight, and said, “Empty. The maids probably made off with anything of value. I was certain Grandfather had everything of hers packed away.”

He glanced over at Will, one eye catching the faint lamplight, the other in darkness, watching as his husband fished something out from beneath his pillow.

“Do you know who this belongs to?” Hannibal asked, the sense-memory of Jasmine perfume filling his nose. He could almost feel her there, cloudy-eyed and groggy, her hair hanging in a mussed mess around her shoulders.

She vanished like fog in sunlight when Will drew near, the warmth of his scent driving away the faint traces of Jasmine.

“I do know who it belongs to,” Will said, holding something out to him. “This was hidden beneath the lining.”

It was a little book, a journal.

A familiar book, at that.

‘... always scribbling away! Let me see, it! Such a confounding language, Ryu. You do so love your mystery...’

Hannibal flipped it over without hesitation and leaned towards the lamplight, reading the only inscription written in English.

_I am Murasaki. I am Murasaki. I am Murasaki and will always be..._

“Lady Murasaki,” he murmured, flipping the book closed in a smooth, firm motion.

“Bedelia took me to the Gallery at Fernhill,” Will said, reaching out to cover Hannibal's hands in his, soothing his distress.

“She told me some little of what had happened. Who Murasaki was, who Mischa was, how your father and grandfather fought, how... how you lost them.”

Hannibal said nothing, his thoughts still caught in the tangled web of a childhood that had always been a closed door to him in so many ways.

“I intended to tell you come morning,” Will said, doubt creeping into his voice. “I was not keeping it from y—”

“No, I know that,” Hannibal said, drawn from his thoughts by Will's sudden uncertainty. He eased free of Will's hold and put the book back into his hands, closing his fingers around it with firm insistence. “Do as you please with this, Will.”

Will cast a dubious look at him, shorter now without his shoes but no less an honorable wolf without his mask.

“You can toss it into a fire or sink it into the river along with her or find someone to translate it if you wish to do so,” Hannibal urged, his smile small and strained. “If there is any person in the world who can redeem the Lady Murasaki, it is you.”
Will swallowed hard, touched. He was even more touched when Hannibal added, “I myself am an excellent example of your talents, am I not?”

“You are,” Will said, moving to place the book on his vanity. He picked the tray up and carried it to the foot of his bed where he settled it against the foot board before returning to his husband.

When he began loosening his buttons, Hannibal smiled, the vestiges of his unease dissipating in the face of Will’s gentle care, woes for another day he did not wish to trouble him in this moment with his mate.

“Mind yourself, Lord Clarges,” he murmured, getting a wolfish grin from Will.

“I can always wake Berger,” Will echoed back at him, stripping the thick, heavy military jacket from him and draping it over the back of his vanity chair. “But I prefer to pamper you myself, as you are terribly spoiled and far too used to it.”

Hannibal laughed at that, relieved to have the weight of the jacket off of him.

“I’m going to wash up,” Will said, leaving Hannibal to take his boots and stockings off on his own. “And then I am going to get in that bed and eat until I am ready to burst and we are going to talk.”

“About what?” Hannibal asked, holding his balance gracefully on one foot to pull his other boot off.

Will clicked the light on in the washroom, the gas light blooming to show the tender anticipation on his beautiful face when he turned to say, “About everything.”

Hannibal smiled, and did as his husband said.

They washed up just enough to feel refreshed and lay on Will’s bed with the tray at the foot, nibbling on the simple meal and amusing one another with stories of their night at the ball. Hannibal fed Will every now and then, and Will fed him in turn, blushing when his fingers were kissed with each offering.

Eventually, their conversation returned to the subject of Murasaki, as Will intended. When Hannibal’s eyes strayed to the vanity and the lacquered box there, Will curled against the pillows and took Hannibal’s hand in his, idly tracing his fingers and the veins that lined the back of his hand.

“Would you tell me about it?” he asked, murmuring it softly into the small space between them. “I know it must weigh on you.”

Hannibal said nothing, but his mouth twitched in a soft frown.

“Bedelia showed me the portrait of your father,” Will said, leaning over to put the lamp out, leaving them both in the dusky-dark of predawn. “You look very much like him.”

“Do I?” Hannibal asked, smiling at Will, but it was tinged with sadness. “I don’t remember him very well. Just his voice, moments divorced from context. I thought it was because I was so young when he died, but it is odd that I cannot recall his face, as you mentioned. When I think of my childhood, I remember my sister, Mischa, most clearly.”

“It is truly a tragedy that she was taken so young,” Will said, folding Hannibal’s fingers in his own in a soft squeeze. “When I went to Duxbury I saw the stones.”

Hannibal laughed, a short and wry sound. “My father’s grand resting place?”

“Bedelia mentioned there was strife between them,” Will admitted. He cut his eyes to his husband’s, watching his response when he added, “She warned me that Lecter men have tempers.”

“Heavens, yes, unfortunately,” Hannibal said, chuckling at his cousin’s meddling. “Grandfather disowned him, did she tell you that? All because of his concubine.”

“Murasaki,” Will murmured, thinking of the plain stone and how strange it was she had been buried in the Lecter cemetery when she had never been a Lecter in name.

He realized Hannibal was staring at the jewelry box, frowning and grim, transported to an unhappy childhood with the mention of a name.

“Bedelia said your family had been lost in an accident,” Will said, feeling the pain of it like a hard place in Hannibal’s heart, a wound scarred over without healing, and he was compelled to reach out. “That the river took them.”
Hannibal sighed and looked over at him, leaning his head towards Will's to rest there, almost touching. “We fished in the very same river they died in; rather, the split that goes around the Capital. The first time Grandfather took me to Marsham Heath, I looked for debris from the wreckage. A child’s hope to find some trace of them.”

He fell still, reflective, for a moment once more a child scouring the riverbank with a grim frenzy that had frightened his grandfather.

“Bedelia told me you were leaving Hartford,” Will said, the memory of her story firmly in mind. “That there was a storm?”

“Yes, it was very early spring,” Hannibal said, tugging against Will’s hand, not to free his fingers, but to distract himself. “Father had brought us to Hartford to see Grandfather and they had a row. They were always arguing, he and Grandfather.”

“About your stepmother?” Will ventured, closing the gap to rest his forehead against Hannibal’s, ignoring the twinge from the bruises that still ached on his ribs after a long night of activity.

“Yes, about her, about me,” Hannibal said, relaxing against him. “Grandfather wanted me to live with him. I wanted to live with him to get away from Murasaki, but only if Mischa would, as well, and Grandfather agreed. My father was incensed and his concubine insisted we leave. She wouldn’t hear of staying, no matter that it was night and dangerous. She goaded my father into heeding her and we left.”

Will absorbed that moment, his Gift entirely freed to experience through Hannibal’s memories what had happened, how it had felt, how it had pushed its nails into the fabric of his heart and torn a hole that could never be mended.

“The river had risen through the day,” Hannibal recalled, his voice softening as he was drawn back to that night. “It crossed the bridge. The coachman couldn’t see anything. He refused to go further and wanted to turn back. My father threw him off and took his place.”

“That was a very dangerous thing to do,” Will said, fiddling with Hannibal’s fingers, the noise of his heartbeat becoming the rumble of thunder on that stormy, ominous night.

“It was stupid and foolish,” Hannibal said, surprised by how harsh the words were coming out of him, surprised by the anger he still had all this time later. “Stupid to have gone out on such a night, stupid to have tried to drive the coach in his drunken state, and stupid to have listened to her in the first place. Lightning struck a tree next to the lane and spooked the horses. He couldn’t get them under control.”

Will trembled, feeling his anger and the sour, heavy taste of despair. “It must have been frightening...”

“It was absolutely terrifying,” Hannibal breathed, his body shaking in a soft shudder. “When I first arrived on the battlefield, the boom of the cannons would take me back to that night. There is no sound that can quite encompass such fearful power as the crack of lightning. If the rain hadn’t been so heavy, it would’ve burned the forest for miles around. The flame it lit was the only way I could see her face...”

“Mischa,” Will said, a name on a tombstone, a child who, had she lived, would be a grown woman older even than him.

“She was so afraid,” Hannibal said, the ache in him sharpening, as if such an honest recollection of that time allowed the wound to open, allowed all of those things he never let touch him come pouring out into Will’s perceptive Gift. “She was sitting on her mother’s lap... we rattled around like pebbles in the coach as it moved and my father’s shouting only made her more afraid. There was another crack of lightning. I could see her face. She was reaching for me. I can’t recall if I reached back or not, or just wanted to. The horses went over the side and the coach upended.”

Will made a small, distressed noise, fingers clenching on Hannibal’s, imagining the sickening weightlessness they must have felt, a split-second of nothing before chaos overtook them.

“The coach hit the bridge and the stones at the riverside and fell sideways into the water,” Hannibal said, lost in his memory. “I never knew how my father died, but it was fast, I think. I hope. I like to think he died the second we hit. It was certainly a better death than the one he gave his concubine and daughter...”

He closed his eyes to find the same darkness that had pervaded everything that night, Will’s soft scent an anchor in the storm, keeping him tethered by the gentle hands on his.

“The shaft cracked in half on impact and the broken end drove up through the seat when the coach struck the stones,” Hannibal said, shuddering as lightning cracked in his memory, illuminating his sister and stepmother. “It pierced them both. It went straight through her and through Mischa. One second my sister was alive, and the next she was... gone.”

Will drew a shallow breath and whispered, “Hannibal, I am so sorry...”
“It was fast, at least,” he said, retreating into distance, pulling the barrier of his control between him and that moment, trying not to let it touch him. “I was relatively unharmed, but my father’s concubine somehow lived. It was shock, I believe. She was dead, she just didn’t know it yet. I remember the coach was filling with water and she was looking at me. She never looked at me, not really. But she did then, sitting with her dead daughter in her lap and that broken shaft jutting out of her and water rushing up to cover her in freezing terror. Despite everything, I wanted to help her.”

“Of course you did,” Will said, dismayed by the unhappy smile he got in return. “Hannibal, you wanted to help her because you’re a good man. You’re a good man.”

“I could not help her,” he said, shoulders slumping. “I tried to, but she wouldn’t have me. Even then, she wouldn’t have me. I got the coach door above me open and reached back for her. I dream of that moment sometimes, the way her eyes went wide, the way the lightning flashed in them, as if her hatred of me filled her with strength. She screamed at me to get away, she swung her hand at me and found the strength somehow to scream.”

Will fell silent, the details coalescing inside of him as they always did, taking the disparate pieces and fitting them together like a puzzle made of human emotion and motivation.

“I pulled myself out of the coach and before I could even get clear, the current dragged it free from where it had lodged and bore them away,” Hannibal said, taking a deep breath as the immediacy of that moment faded to less sharp memories. “I barely remember making my way back to Fernhill. I don’t even recall why I chose to go there, instead of to Grandfather... perhaps I feared he would find me responsible...”

“How could you have been responsible for such a terrible accident, Hannibal?” Will asked, brows drawn together in concentration, his voice soft and gentle. “You were a child at the mercy of your father. If there is blame to be laid, lay it at the feet of temper and take none for yourself.”

“I lay it at her feet, his Lady Murasaki,” Hannibal said, her name dripping with disdain. “I’ll never understand why she pitched such a fit about Mischa living with me under Grandfather’s care. She played with Mischa like a doll but it wasn’t as if either one of them ever paid us any true attention... She hated children. She particularly hated me.”

Will took in the pain he saw there beneath the surface of Hannibal’s frown, a lifetime of hatred based on rejection, on a child’s interpretation of the world’s uncaring rules.

“Why would she hate you, Hannibal?” Will asked, hoping to get some clue as to what had gone so terribly wrong there.

“She always hated me,” Hannibal answered, twining his fingers with Will’s, his eyes lowered in thought. “Her last act on this earth was to reject me.”

Will thought of what he had said, drawing the details into his Gift, imagining himself in that moment with the coach flooding with water, reaching for a woman who had no hope of living. It prompted him to ask, “You said that the coach was wedged into the rocks? That the shaft had gone through her from the force?”

Hannibal nodded, his forehead rubbing lightly against Will’s.

“Then she would have felt it when the coach was pulling free,” Will mused, aware of Hannibal’s sudden stillness. “She would have known it was about to get swept away.”

Hannibal’s breath came in short little bursts, a possibility before him that he had never considered.

“I would never presume to know better than you in that regard, Hannibal, but perhaps she was not rejecting you,” Will said, the gentle offering made with an understanding Hannibal lacked. “You were a child, her feelings for you aside. Knowing she would not survive, perhaps she wanted you to save yourself?”

‘Get away! Get away!’

“My father would have taken hold of me and drowned me with him,” Will said, thinking of what might have happened had their situations been reversed. “He would never abide my surviving if he should not.”

Hannibal turned slightly to look at him, the memory taking on new meaning, the widening of her eyes cast in new light. The moment, perhaps, when she had felt the shaft give and knew what lay before her.

“I had not considered it,” he said, realization softening his voice. “I had always felt that she could not help but leave this world sure in the knowledge I understood how much she despised me. Why should she ever worry for me, after our life together?”
“People are complicated and difficult,” Will said, feeling the shift and change in his mate as Hannibal considered this new information. “If you think you know someone entirely, then you can be sure you hardly know them at all. We are complex and distressing creatures at our very best, and we are so rarely at our very best.”

Hannibal smiled at that, and said, “It is a wonder to me that someone as young as you are can have such a clear understanding of the human condition.”

“It is a wonder to me that someone of your age and vast experience can be surprised,” Will said, relieved when his smile brought a widening of Hannibal’s own. “Thank you, Hannibal, for telling me of that night. It must have been very painful for you and I must have seemed very prying to ask.”

“You are entitled to ask me anything you wish,” Hannibal said, his smile turning to a thoughtful quirk of his lips when he admitted, “And you have given me something to ponder which I have never thought to consider before. It makes the memory of what happened less painful to think it was as you said, rather than how I recall it.”

“I would never wish to dismiss what she has done to so profoundly harm you, Hannibal,” Will said, searching his face, so earnest Hannibal reached up to lightly cup his face, moved. “I know too well how terrible the power is that an adult holds over a child. Perception is tricky; I know my own recollection of my father’s behavior is not as accurate as I could wish for.”

“We are all of us unreliable narrators of our own lives,” Hannibal said, his fingers searching out Will’s ear and jaw, a soft, brushing touch that settled him. “We both have taken our blows and have the scars to show it... I hope the future holds far better for you than the past, Will... whatever you eventually decide.”

Will said nothing, only leaned into him with a contemplative sigh as they both fell into reflective silence. Hannibal felt him grow heavier and it seemed when he blinked that sunlight had inexplicably come to invade the room. Realizing he’d fallen into a doze curled up with his husband, he eased from the bed and drew the drapes closed, throwing the room into near total darkness. He moved the tray to the hallway and returned to his sleeping mate, who lay comfortably against the pillows in deep, exhausted sleep.

With silent, tender devotion, he divested Will of his crumpled pants, tossing them towards the wardrobe and admiring the muscular expanse of Will’s legs in all their glory.

“Not the least bit of an unhappy prospect,” Hannibal murmured, smiling when he thought of what had been said regarding Will’s ability to strangle a man with his thighs. He hefted Will half into his arms and tugged the covers down, pulling them free to ease him beneath.

Will sighed in his sleep and Hannibal bent down to kiss his forehead, shivering when Will’s snub of a nose poked beneath his jaw in an unconscious, instinctive scenting.

He smoothed Will’s curls and tucked him in before retreating to his own dark room, already missing his mate’s warmth and presence. It felt very lonely to be ensconced in his cold bed with the knowledge that Will was just a room away.

But it was Will’s choice. It would always be Will’s choice to make, and his husband would let him know when he was ready, if ever.

He rolled onto his side and nuzzled the garter ribbon tied around his wrist, finally drifting off to sleep with a slight, content smile.

Afternoon found Will longing to be up and about. As comfortable and novel as it was to stay abed as late as he wanted, he was never one to be idle and felt restless to have lost so much of the day to sleep.

Jimmy came immediately when he rang for him and Will found himself recounting the details of his night as he bathed, laughing and chatting with the valet who had always been more friend than servant.

“Has Hannibal risen?” Will asked, tugging at his cuffs and shrugging his shoulders to settle his jacket while Jimmy put his brush and comb away. Their masks hung from his vanity mirror, Stag and Wolf, placed there in a moment of whimsy by his valet and left in place at Will’s insistence. He enjoyed looking at them and returning to their night at the ball, and he intended to do so as often as possible.

“Yes, he’s been up for some time,” Jimmy said, and after a small hesitation, he said, “Beg your pardon, my Lord, but can I ask what on earth this is?”
“Hm?” Will turned to see Jimmy holding Murasaki’s journal and peering at it with consternation. “I found it in the wardrobe. It was hidden in that jewelry box.”

“I wondered why that old thing was out here,” Jimmy remarked, confusion still pinching his features. “Should I get rid of it? What is it?”

“It belonged to Hannibal’s stepmother, Jimmy,” Will said, turning the book in his hands to open the back cover. “The Lady Murasaki.”

“Oh, my stars,” Jimmy breathed, eyes rounding in surprise. “It was in the jewelry box, you say?”

“It has a false bottom,” Will told him. “I think that is the only way it survived whatever purge His Grace requested of her things. I am glad that the jewelry box itself is so beautiful, else who knows what might have happened to it and its hidden book.”

“This is remarkable, my Lord,” Jimmy said, closing the book with care. “Does his Lordship know about this?”

Will nodded and said, “He told me to do as I please with it. Jimmy, would you know where I might inquire after a translator?”

Jimmy was silent for a moment, a shadow of doubt flickering in his eyes.

“I am not familiar with this... language? Code? But I can make some inquiries,” he offered, peering again at the writing within. “Do you mind if I take it with me?”

“Please do,” Will said, smiling at him. “And if they need to keep it rather than translate it in my presence, just ensure that they take care of it and keep their name. I don’t want this vanishing. Of course, whoever they are will need to be discreet.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Jimmy said, his smile wide and beaming. “It might take some time.”

“Take however long you need,” Will insisted, heading towards the door. “And thank you, Jimmy.”

***

Berger had made a run to the solicitor’s office while they were sleeping, bless him, and Hannibal found a letter from Grandfather waiting for him, detailing that, in an odd change of circumstance, Matthew Brown had gone missing. Missing to the point that neither his father nor his sisters could say where, only that he had vanished without word to anyone.

*The detectives are here and investigating, but this is a very unsettling situation, Hannibal. They questioned Peter so severely I had to intercede. He was brought to tears, poor lad, and was most insistent I relay to Will that Athena will soon have her puppies. I assured him I would do so, and rely on you to pass the word on.*

*Zeller has not yet returned with any news of Mason Verger’s whereabouts, but when he does, I shall have him looking for Mr. Brown at once.*

*As for the Lady Rathmore, she has been the picture of good behavior. She has called on everyone of note in Hartford and has made herself abundantly available to the staff on all matters of running the household, which has left them all quite exhausted. Your Aunt Margaret joined us for dinner and confided that she is vastly relieved our family can claim the more agreeable and pleasant sibling. She also warned me that she wished to speak to you, and soon, on a matter she refused to divulge. Forewarned is forearmed, my boy.*

*On the subject of her husband, the Lady Rathmore has spoken only three words when broached—“I couldn’t say”. Mr. Stammets is making inquiries into their family situation for me, as that seemed fairly irregular.*

*Take good care of our dear Will, Hannibal, and I shall hold down the front here with Mr. Hawkes and Mrs. Henderson. Hopefully we shall have this matter dealt with to our satisfaction before my little gathering.*

There was no closing sentiment. There never was with Grandfather’s letters. They were neither of them sentimental, in the end. The contents, however, were troublesome. Matthew Brown had no reason that Hannibal could discern to harm Will, considering how long they had known one another, but vanishing in such a way without word to his family was mightily suspicious and he wrote back with every support of Grandfather’s efforts in that direction, adding a reassuring note of how he had settled his affairs at Galley Field to everyone’s benefit and was keeping an eye on Francis inasmuch as he could, considering.

*He is loose without direct supervision, only the attendance of Magistrate Crawford’s men. I expect Lady Rathmore will be receiving a letter from him quite soon. Be alert to any change in her disposition. I don’t altogether trust either one of*
them, despite Will's insistence they will not act against him. If you learn anything further, please send word, or Zeller, or both, and I trust you to be well taken care of by the staff at Hartford. If Mason Verger shows his face on the property, instruct the staff to restrain him by any means and force necessary. I, too, am going to look into the Rathmore situation at Will's request. I expect that by the time this reaches you, you will have been heartily amused by the contents of the gossip column. Take care of yourself, Grandfather, and remain ever vigilant.

He fully expected there to be a report for him when he returned to Marsham, detailing what Francis had been about. He wondered if Francis, too, would be waiting when they returned, and how he would react to being separated from Will under circumstances not of his own making.

It brought a smug, thoroughly Alpha smile to Hannibal's lips and brightened his mood just to consider it, even if it was not something Will would approve of.

Thoughts turning to his mate, Hannibal rang Berger and asked if Will was up yet.

"Price just came out on a mission, m'Lord, so I imagine if he's leaving the house, then his Lordship is up and about," Berger said, fussing with Hannibal's jacket.

"Fetch Will's coat, Berger, if you would," Hannibal requested, drawing his own on. "I am taking my spouse out to see the city, if he's up for it."

"Don't imagine there's much he ain't up for, m'Lord," Berger said with a chuckle, moving to do as he was told. "He's a fine and sassy mite, to be sure."

"Not a bit brawny, you'd say?" Hannibal called after him as Berger went into Will's suite.

"Not as such, my Lord. Why d'you ask?"

"No reason," Hannibal said, pleased and preening. "But remind me to give you a raise, Berger."

He took himself off downstairs, thinking it was likely Will would be in the parlor, and that was precisely where Hannibal found him, once more his somber and serious Will who always seemed to carry a world's worth of weighty thoughts in the furrow of his brow.

"Ah! There you are! How are you feeling?" Hannibal called, waiting in the doorway for Will to look up from his letter writing and acknowledge him.

"Certain that I dreamed last night," Will said, glancing up to find his husband was dressed to go out. "Mina will never believe the contents of this letter."

"Speaking of letters, we've had one from Grandfather," Hannibal said, fishing it from his waistcoat pocket to hand to Will, who read it with keen absorption.

"Matthew Brown cannot be part of this," Will breathed, frowning and disturbed. "He has had six years to do as he pleases, Hannibal. Why would he do something now and then vanish in such a suspicious way?"

"You feel that we are being given a distraction?" Hannibal asked, relieved that Will could so easily give voice to his own doubts.

"I believe we are being... offered an alternative," Will told him. "At any rate, if and when Matthew is found, I want no action taken against him until I can speak to him. There is an explanation here and I will not rest until I have it."

"The detectives are still investigating," Hannibal reminded him. "Anything they find in the way of evidence will be given to Grandfather and to us. The truth will make itself known."

Will read the letter again, his tension fading to sympathy. "Poor Peter. They should not be so harsh with him. If there is a more gentle and caring man, I have yet to meet him."

"He will rally," Hannibal said. "He has always been much stronger than we know. Perhaps Athena will have her puppies and he will have something pleasant to think of."

"Yes," Will said, his eyes growing distant as he considered what Hannibal had said. "I will hurry and finish these letters so you may take them. That is, if you are going out?"

"We are going out, if you would care to join me," Hannibal said, holding Will's greatcoat aloft in invitation. "We can have lunch at the Grand and I can show you the shops. I have some business to conduct on the Row and there are things I think we should get you."

“Like what?” Will asked, finishing his letter rather abruptly and waving it to dry the ink. “I can think of nothing I need.”

“I can think of a thousand things without trying,” Hannibal said, giving his mate an indulgent smile. “But namely, the calling cards we spoke of.”

“Shall I wheedle you for something, Lord Clarges?” Will asked, snorting his opinion of that suggestion. He sealed his letters before standing to take his coat.

“Perhaps for trunks, if you would like to wheedle? Jimmy informs me you have only those two shabby things from your childhood,” Hannibal teased, helping Will pull his coat on. “And I believe I promised a wardrobe or two to a lovely Courtier last night.”

“Hannibal,” Will warned.

“I must deliver, or I might never see him again,” Hannibal said, grinning. “And I cannot stand the thought of that.”

“Keep it up and you might never see me again,” Will said, his soft laugh trailing off when Hannibal’s smile faltered. Seeing his uncertainty made Will wish he had chosen better words. Chastened, he said, “I apologize, I did not mean—”

“I know,” Hannibal said, though he seemed strained and dampened by Will’s statement. “It is always yours to choose. I am a lucky man that you do not choose lightly. Come, we have a city to see and you have waited long enough to enjoy it.”

Chelsea House was, as Hannibal had said, very nicely situated. It was only a short stroll away to reach the ruckus of the Row. Will watched the people as much as he looked at his surroundings, invigorated by the cold air and a good night’s sleep. The buildings towered overhead far higher than even Hartford’s highest turret, and the walkways were thronged with fashionable people in their finest, all looking quite pleased with being seen, even in the lingering fog.

There were dress shops, haberdashers, jewelers, tobacconists, tea houses, all manner of small bakeries and eateries, and no few hotels, all stretching down a massive, busy street filled with window-shoppers, street performers, and merchants with small, movable stations, one of which got closed down by constables as they were passing it.

“This is Mr. Avery's sister store,” Hannibal said, pointing at the massive building that housed a dozen individual businesses, at least. “And there is Gideon and Garnets, one of the finest jewelers in the country, though his sense of humor is quite sharp.”

“There must be quite a lot of bleeding when the two of you are in company,” Will absently said, missing Hannibal’s wide grin. “Your office is here, is it not?”

“Two streets over, nearer the residences,” Hannibal said. “We can walk that direction. I shall need to make arrangements to refer my patients before long.”

“Refer them? Will you no longer take patients?” Will asked, still looking around with wonder, his eye snared by the glitter of jewels in the window at Gideon and Garnets.

“If you decide to allow me to stay with you at Hartford,” Hannibal said, slowing to a stop so that Will could look his fill, “then I was thinking of removing my practice to the country. There is no proper medical clinic for hours; I thought it might be of benefit to have a local hospital built in town. Perhaps near your railroad?”

Will blinked and pulled his gaze away from the display, reflecting on what Hannibal had just said. “You wish to start a hospital in Hartford?”

“Yes,” Hannibal confirmed. “I know several doctors who would jump at the opportunity to relocate out of the city, and there is need enough. With the rail coming and the lanes building up, thanks to you, we will be able accessible there. Nothing huge and fancy at first, just small with the potential to grow.”

Will pondered it, turning back to the display to keep Hannibal from inspecting his expression too closely. “You would give up your practice here to become a country doctor? Could that ever suit you, Hannibal? You seem... at home here in the city.”

“I am. I have enjoyed the city immensely these past years,” Hannibal said, “and I will not be entirely bereft of it. We shall come for the Season, as we must for me to do my duties on Grandfather’s behalf, but I am not particularly attached to the city, as such.”

“You truly would make Hartford your home?”

There was uncertainty in that soft question. Uncertainty, disbelief, and a host of simmering doubts that almost completely hid the surprised pleasure beneath it all.
Hannibal caught his eye in the window, one reflection regarding another. “I would make it our home, Will. If that is what you choose.”

Thoughtful silence followed that statement along with the familiar wrinkle of Will's brow.

“That is such a strange concept to me,” Will said, shifting to look at him face to face. “Hartford has always been yours, Hannibal, no matter what your grandfather says. I have never had a place to belong.”

“Now you do,” Hannibal said, amber eyes searching his face, flicking back and forth as if chasing the uncertainty away. “You belong with me, Will.”

It brought a soft chuff of surprised laughter from him, embarrassed and disbelieving, but Hannibal was determined. However long it took, he would make Will believe it.

“Shall we go in?” he murmured, willing to give his flustered mate an escape route.

“No, it's too excessive, it seems the height of vanity to even consider going inside,” Will said, stepping back from the window.

“Then it is fitting, as I am a creature entirely composed of vanity,” Hannibal said, snagging his arm. “Come along.”

“Hannibal...” The protest was faint, token. Will was pulled from his refusal by his husband snagging his arm and found himself entering a world full of sparkling, exquisite jewelry.

“How beautiful,” he said, the words escaping him before he could still them. He was barely aware of Hannibal's hand on his elbow, guiding him within. He was too busy looking at the displays of meticulously crafted jewelry, his eyes eagerly searching out the next beautiful creation, and the next.

“Indeed, it is, and you must be Lord Clarges.”

A bearded, somewhat amused-looking gentleman came towards them, dressed in the height of fashion and impeccably turned out even down to the winking stones of his many rings.

“Gideon,” Hannibal said, turning a little to add, “You always have had an ear for information. This is Will, my spouse.”

“I know that, my Lord,” Gideon said, appraising Will as one might a precious stone. Oddly, it felt as impersonal as just that and Will didn't mind it. He was more intrigued by Gideon's cat-like amusement and unusual inflection on his words.

“Everyone with eyes and ears knows that. You, Lord Clarges, are a perfect canvas.”

“Excuse me?” Will asked, a startled laugh escaping him. “Mr. Gideon, is it? I am no canvas, sir. I am not even sure why we are here.”

“If I had to guess, I’d say teacups and time,” Gideon said, looking pleased with himself.

“Teacups and time?” Will echoed, befuddled. He started when a trilling, feminine voice called out, “Lord Clarges! There you are! Oh, we have missed you so! Haven't we? Haven't we? Yes! Come in, please do come in!”

A spare, tall woman hastened through the shoppers and staff, a graceful bird of a woman decked out in a jewel-toned red gown, hands fluttering like pale wings. She virtually beamed at Hannibal, and Will wondered how much time his husband spent buying jewelry and for whom.

“Mrs. Garnet, it is lovely to see you, as always,” Hannibal said. “May I introduce my spouse.”

“Lord Clarges,” she said to Will, including him in her smile. “What a lovely young person you are! How delighted I am to have you here in our little store! We just received the most beautiful opals! I said to myself when I saw them, why, Lord Clarges shall want these set at once as a gift for his stunning spouse! What better compliment to beauty is there than beauty, my Lords?”

Will barely suppressed a smile at her pandering, but it was done without spite or malice and Hannibal easily went along with it, insisting that Will be shown the stones at once.

“I must speak to Gideon, however,” he said, depositing Will with Mrs. Garnet where one of the jewelers began unveiling the opals in question, and said to Will, “If you don't mind looking around in my absence?”

“You take your time! Take your time! We'll do very well, here, won't we, Lord Clarges?” Mrs. Garnet cooed, and Will just smiled, tolerating the attention and curious enough not to grow impatient with it.

“Come along, Lord Clarges,” Gideon said, moving towards the back of the store where the work was done. “Wouldn't want to keep you from your lovely spouse for long, would we?”
Hannibal followed him, but always with Will in the periphery of his vision. A footman had accompanied them in case they needed to send any packages back to Chelsea House, and he, too, was vigilant to his surroundings.

“Well, well, I didn't expect to see you here again so soon, Lord Clarges,” Gideon said as he withdrew the package from beneath the counter. His smile was faintly mocking, as always. It was no secret that Gideon found the rich and powerful to be powerfully amusing and rich in flaws, but ultimately tiresome. It did not stop him, however, from taking their money and then some, “considering it isn’t birthday time.”

“Have you taken a look—”

“Yes, I have,” Gideon said, cocking his head to regard Hannibal. “Quite a mess you've made, Lord Clarges.”

“You don't know the half of it, and don't start,” Hannibal warned. “Can you fix it?”

“My Lord, Hephaestus in all his wondrous power could not fix it,” Gideon said, never losing his slight smile. “I can have a replica m—”

“No, it must be the same one,” Hannibal said, immediately waving away the suggestion. “There must be some way to repair it.”

Gideon frowned, his assessing eyes flicking from Hannibal to Will and back again.

“There is a way,” he admitted. “But it’s a method we don’t do ourselves. We would have to send it out.”

“Then do so,” Hannibal insisted, adding, “It must be fixed. It must be made whole again.”

“It will never be the same, my Lord,” Gideon said, brows rising at his vehemence. “It will never be functional—”

“It doesn't need to be,” Hannibal said, casting a look back at Will, who was staring down at the famed opals, the glimmering of the jewels no match for the sparkle of pure wonder in his wide eyes. “It only needs to be whole again, and itself. That is all I ask.”

Gideon absorbed that for a moment, and then his smile widened and he said, “As you wish, Lord Clarges. Never say I’m a man to ignore the demands of love, hm?”

“You do so enjoy skating on very thin ice, Gideon,” Hannibal said, frowning at him.

Mr. Gideon's smile grew sly at that. “There’s a certain excitement in tempting fate, Lord Clarges, what can I say? If I might make a suggestion?”

Hannibal looked at him expectantly, waiting.

“His Grace makes a commission once a year to have a pin made for a certain young someone I can only assume is your lovely Marquess,” Gideon said. “I believe that, my Lord, is in fact a birthday, and one you might do well not to miss.”


“Oh, I'd rather you just owe me the money, Lord Clarges,” Mr. Gideon said, amused. “He seems very serious for such a young man. Perhaps a pocket watch? He doesn't strike me as an Omega who fancies frippery and jewels.”

“No, he has no patience for anything such, no matter how well it would suit him,” Hannibal said, walking with him over to the counter where an assortment of watches was offered for his perusal. Hannibal looked them over all the while watching Will, who was swept away from the jeweler by Mrs. Garnet to a display of the most gods-awful, lavish collection of priceless jewels Hannibal had ever seen. He could imagine Will's reaction, stern and unimpressed, such wealth immaterial in his world where knowledge reigned supreme and fishing was his single, solitary pleasure. “Gideon, do your smiths take commissions for tools?”

“What sort of tools?” came the bland response.

“Instruments used to make fishing lures,” Hannibal said, and watched the wheels turning behind Mr. Gideon's eyes, surprise followed by amusement and replaced by anticipation.

“I'm sure they will, Lord Clarges, he said, smirking softly. “For the right price.”

“In which case, I know precisely what I would like to have made for my spouse for his birthday, and I want it in a particular case,” Hannibal said. “I will write with the details and dimensions. I want the utmost care taken with it and, if at all possible, I want the cup delivered to me along with it.”

“And the pocket watches, my Lord?” Gideon asked, unable to contain his small smile.

“I'll take them,” Hannibal said, waving absently at them. “The lot of them. Have them delivered to the Townhouse. Will may choose which he prefers or keep them all, it makes me no difference. Excuse me.”
“Of course, my Lord,” Gideon said, but Hannibal was already making his way over to Will, eager to get back to his mate.

They went to the printers to order Will’s calling cards, which he chose quietly, with more interest in the process of printing them than in the design. The printer, utterly charmed and flustered to have a Marquess be so familiar with him, gladly showed Will the process they used. Will was delighted by it, and Hannibal was delighted by him, in turn.

The cards he decided on were stark and straightforward, with an elegance eloquent of his nature, striking for their deceptive simplicity, and would be delivered by the end of the day, a flattering accommodation from an otherwise overbooked shop.

That accomplished, Hannibal took his husband to tea in the Grand South Hotel, where Will became aware they were drawing looks and wondered at the cause.

“Is something the matter?” Hannibal asked, seeing Will send another furtive flick of his blue eyes around the room.

“I have had the strangest feeling all afternoon that people are staring at me,” Will said, discomfited. “It is... unsettling.”

“You’re causing a stir,” Hannibal said, smirking when he caught another hastily-lifted hand and eyes cutting Will’s direction.

“I can’t see why,” Will said, his scowl severe but unable to detract in the least from his beauty.

“Gossip, most likely,” Hannibal said. “I imagine those who attended the Masquerade are very sought after just about now, what with their knowledge of such a handsome gentleman.”

“Please,” Will said, a soft snort of disdain accompanying the words. “As if they don’t know everything there is to know about their handsome gentleman.”

“I meant you,” Hannibal said, thoroughly amused by the way Will’s eyes widened momentarily before narrowing with annoyance. “And they don’t know everything about me. They don’t know anything about me, except what I allow them to believe.”

“And what will you allow them to believe about me, Lord Clarges?” Will asked, angling a sideways look at him, admiring his fine features and the figure he cut.

“The truth,” Hannibal told him. “That you are the Marquess of Clarges and my spouse, and they should not agitate you.”

“You reserve that right for yourself?” Will asked, chuckling softly at the way Hannibal grinned.

“Indeed,” Hannibal said. In a light, conversational tone, he asked, “Did you not read the paper when you woke? That might answer your question as to why people are curious about you.”

The waiter came to bring them dainty little cups of coffee and Hannibal asked for the morning paper, which Will read with a furrowed brow, searching for what might be the source of Society's sudden interest in him.

Hannibal sipped his coffee, amused by the way Will’s cheeks gradually darkened in a heated flush as he read. When he looked at Hannibal, there was impressive calm mingling with offended dignity in his furious blue eyes.

“Heavens, such agitation,” Hannibal murmured, settling his cup securely in its saucer. “And not the kind I prefer.”

“I take it that you’ve read what they have written?” Will asked, taking another look around the room to find people watching him anew. He took a nonchalant sip of his coffee, determined to ignore them all.

“Oh, yes, I found it vastly entertaining,” Hannibal said, grinning at him.

“Entertaining?” Will echoed, and drew a deep breath. He folded the paper and put it to one side, his movements careful and studied. “Please enlighten me, my Lord—which part of this... drivel is entertaining you? The part where I am an expatriate spy sent to seduce the Ministry of War council seats individually? Or the part where I am, apparently, the latest conquest of the King's nephew?”

Hannibal smirked, and said, “No, it was the part where you threw him over in my favor.”

“Hannibal,” Will said, scandalized, but his anger giving way to amused disbelief. “I have no idea what this is about! It says we had a pubic tiff! I never—”

“Never?” Hannibal asked, brows shooting up. “Perhaps you recall a certain Ram?”

“A Ram—” Will subsided for a moment before fierce irritation overtook him. In a tone so low Hannibal could barely hear him, Will said, “I had forgotten all about that.”
Hannibal, meanwhile, fished the paper from his side of the table and opened it, reading aloud, “Much to everyone's surprise, the much-loved royal nephew, Bertram of Kirk, better known to the people as 'Prince Bert', was rebuffed by his mysterious Wolf for the Marquess of Clarges, Hannibal Lecter, who claimed his prize at the end of the night by escaping with them in the ducal coach. We have it on good authority, however, that Prince Bert's lover is none other than Lord Clarges' spouse, making their first public appearance under the watchful gaze of both husband and paramour. And perhaps such watchfulness is warranted, with such a compelling beauty on the loo—”

He cut off when Will snatched the paper from him and folded it again before tucking it under the centerpiece.

“I am extremely annoyed,” Will said.

“That has not escaped my notice,” Hannibal said, thoroughly amused. “The gossip column is always diverting.”

Will glared at him, but it softened after a moment. “This doesn't bother you?”

“No,” Hannibal said, returning to his coffee with brisk pleasure. “It certainly doesn't. I cannot allow gossip to bother me, nor should you. Bert is an old friend from boarding school and he is more encumbered by gossip than I have ever been, considering. He said you smacked him with a fan.”

“He deserved it,” Will said, disapproval written in the firm curve of his mouth when he frowned. “He was being altogether unbearable. He was on his way to a sound coshing at that, but I was too irritated by his persistence to be bothered with correcting his unseemly behavior.”

Hannibal chuckled, and said, “He often is unbearable. He was very taken aback by his experience with you.”

“No more than I was with my experience with him,” Will said, annoyed. “Had I known who he was, I would have been even more appalled by his terrible manners. I have difficulty believing he is your friend.”

“He is no longer my friend,” Hannibal said, feigning a somber tone. “There's nothing to be done about it now. With this sort of gossip plaguing us, I shall have to call him out.”

“Honestly,” Will sighed, exasperated into amusement by Hannibal's mock indignation.

“He has impugned the honor of my mate. He has attempted to seduce you. He has commented on your thighs. He spoke openly of admiring your figure, as well as your neck. He has ogled you, and unforgivably so. Worse, he has been slapped with your fan,” Hannibal said, one brow cocking up over his amber eye. “Which is unconscionable. I am the only one you should be slapping with your fan. I reserve the right to agitate you, if you'll recall.”

“You're about to be slapped with this paper,” Will warned him, his disgruntlement fading in the face of Hannibal's amusement. “And then they can write about how I left you sitting here and ran back to Prince Bertram.”

“Goodness, what a scandal we shall make, hm?” Hannibal teased, reaching out to bring Will's hand to his lips for a kiss. “Grandfather is going to laugh the rafters down. He will be absolutely delighted you caused such a commotion your first day in the Capital.”

“Hannibal, in all seriousness,” Will said, cocking his head to one side, “were you to lose the good opinion of others over something so ridiculous—”

“I couldn't give two figs for the good opinion of others, as well you know,” Hannibal said, smirking at Will when their eyes met. “I stand to inherit a title that has few rivals for importance in this country and I have money enough to ensure I never lose it. I have no reason to cater to popular opinion, Lord Clarges—popular opinion must needs cater to me.”

“Arrogant ass,” Will said, the words huffed with throaty laughter.

“Have no worry on the subject of your affair with Bert, Will,” Hannibal told him, standing to offer his arm, which Will took with a wry smile. “Time will tell the true story of your association and the rest is mere annoyance, which you shall have to become accustomed to if you decide not to toss me back like one of your fish.”

“Oh, trust me, Lord Clarges, it is tempting,” Will said, the brilliant smile he gave to his husband enough to allay any worry such a statement might cause, “but I am not one to give up so easily, if the catch is promising enough.”

“Then I shall do everything in my power to entice you,” Hannibal said, and kissed his hand with a smile.
Chapter 29

Word traveled like wildfire on the heels of the Masquerade, fueled by tales from the Dimmond Garden Party and putting Will squarely in the eye of Society’s attention. Hannibal took absolute delight in it, reveling in Will’s surprise when people called out to him and strove to insinuate themselves in his good graces. Yet for being so out of his depth, Will was never once in over his head. He took everything with aplomb and his usual grace, undaunted by anyone or anything and eager to see all that he could of the Capital which his husband had called home.

Hannibal showed Will the city as only a native could—the factories belching smoke into the skies, the great bridge that crossed the sister river which ran past Hartford, the water foul with runoff. They toured his office and he watched Will’s brilliant, inquisitive mind taking stock of it all and what it would take to bring something similar to Hartford. His serious, bright-eyed mate’s mute excitement was heartening to see and it touched Hannibal how he tried so hard not to show too much interest in anything; the echo of those damned gods again, searching to snatch away what happiness he might eek from the world around him.

Now they would have to get through Hannibal first, and he had every confidence in his power to stop them.

They made it a point to visit the Museum of Science and Industry in order to see the expo and found themselves embroiled in a heated debate regarding the separation of church and state with a brilliant young inventor whose only limitation was his unwavering terror of hubris.

Despite coming to a draw, the discourse put Will in an excellent humor, which Hannibal teased him about on their walk home.

“Perhaps I was a bit impassioned,” Will owned, a sheepish grin curving his lips. Night was coming again, a gentle blanket of darkness that softened the harsh edges of the Capital and teased forth the stars. It was pleasant to watch the lamps being lit, pleasant to be strolling on the less crowded sidewalks with his husband’s arm laced through his. “I never imagined myself to be quarrelsome.”

“I wouldn’t say vigorously defending your statements with undeniable facts is being quarrelsome,” Hannibal said, chuckling at the memory of his mate’s flushed cheeks and the excited sparkle in his eyes, all self-consciousness abandoned to making his case and Hannibal right there in the thick of it with him, just as vehement. “He enjoyed it as much as you did, I should think.”

“Though clearly not as much as you,” Will said, tugging on his arm. He idly glanced at the shops as they passed and said, “That reminds me, I need to purchase a hat. One with flowers and feathers.”

“Are you formulating a plan to disarm him with your appearance before delivering the fatal blow?” Hannibal asked, delighted when Will turned his gloved fingers against his arm and pinched him. “Ah, but you have no need of such tricks when your wits were more than a match for him.”

“Quite right,” Will said, though he was smiling as he said so. “No, Miss Hobbs entertained me with her talk of hats. I understand that she has never owned one that was new. I thought I might bring her one as a gift.”

“First Prince Bert and now a maid,” Hannibal tutted. “How many of us will you have dancing on your line, Will?”

“Who knows?” Will said, with that sly, wry look Hannibal had so quickly come to adore.

“You might add the printer to your list of conquests,” Hannibal suggested. “He was fairly smitten by you.”

“Nonsense, he was nothing of the sort,” Will said, chuckling when Hannibal moved to open the gate onto Chelsea House.

“What? What is it?” Hannibal asked, noting his sudden grin and smiling in response.

“It seems I am not to be subjected to any manner of openable object when you are within reach,” Will observed, moving past him towards the door with a small incline of his head. “Doors, gates—luckily it has not occurred to you to open my letters for me.”

“Well it has now,” Hannibal called after him, closing the gate with a laugh. “You are my husband and I will protect you.”

“From my papers?” Will asked, amused. Mr. Black opened the door wide and waited on them, poker-faced and patient.

“From anything that seeks to harm you,” Hannibal said, reaching the stoop and raising Will’s hand for a kiss, a merry twinkle in his amber eyes when he murmured, “Particularly papers.”
“Well, you won’t be protecting me from my correspondence anytime too soon,” Will said, crossing the threshold and handing his greatcoat off to Mr. Black, “as we have forgotten in all the excitement to visit Mr. Buddish’s office.”

Hannibal frowned, and said, “I will return shortly.”

“Must you?” Will asked, mystified to see the number of cards waiting for them in the foyer. “There were no pressing matters. It can surely wait until tomorrow?”

“I insist on delivering such dangerous items from your presence,” Hannibal said, dropping a kiss on Will’s forehead where the familiar wrinkles had appeared. “Don’t be cross.”

“I am never cross,” Will reminded him, cocking his head in warning. “Merely thoughtful.”

“Well, that is something I cannot protect you from, sadly enough,” Hannibal said, donning his hat again in preparation to leave. “Check the cards for any invitations that might entice you, and we will decide on my return who to spend the rest of our evening with.”

He tipped his hat to Will with a charming smile and a wink before vanishing out into the night again.

Will moved to the window and watched him go back towards the Row, moving with purpose. He was alone on the street, a solitary figure in lamplight slowly swallowed by the thickening fog.

A sharp pang welled in his chest, the impulse to go after Hannibal taking him by surprise with its strength, this fervent wish that his husband should not walk alone. How happy he himself would have been in days gone by for the company of another beside him...

Will swallowed back the tightness in his throat when Hannibal's form vanished entirely. The pang became a dull ache so palpable he pressed his hand to his heart to ease it, unsettled and saddened.

“We are very glad you are here, Lord Clarges,” Mr. Black said, aware of his sudden distress and reaching out in the only way he could—through conversation. “He has always been a peculiar boy, but even peculiar people need love.”

Will looked away from the window, a light flush on his cheeks to be caught so unguarded. He knew what his father would make of this moment, of his response. He would call him silly for feeling such a thing, nothing more than a simpering Omega pining for their Alpha out of an excess of foolish ignorance. There was no censure, however, in Mr. Black's soft comment, only relief.

“He has been alone for a very long time,” Mr. Black said, turning his own gaze to the window to free Will of his scrutiny. “Even as a baby.”

“You’ve served the family since even then?” Will asked, surprised as Mr. Black was not all that aged, far younger than Mr. Hawkes and certainly younger than poor, half-deaf Mr. Thatcher.

“I had just become a footman here at Chelsea House when his Lordship was born, youngest one on staff,” Mr. Black said, beaming a bit, as well he should in Will’s opinion. “Tragedy seems to haunt the Lecter family. Her Ladyship was so very excited to be a mother. She didn’t speak very much of our language, but her lady’s maid did, and often passed on to us how she wanted a whole houseful of children.”

“You knew her,” Will said, drawing closer to him, grateful for the curiosity that rescued him from the strange sense of loss he felt, as if Fate had spied him there in the window and pressed Her thumb on his heart in dire warning he was not forgotten. “It must stand to reason that you knew the Lady Murasaki, as well.”

Mr. Black turned and gave him a sharp look, surprised to hear him say her name. “His Grace forbids us to speak of her, my Lord.”

“But she is why Hannibal has always been alone,” Will pressed. “Is she not?”

Mr. Black studied him, contemplating his next words carefully. “No, my Lord. She is not the reason he was always alone. She was kept from him. From the little girl, as well. Little Mischa.”

Will’s mind turned those words over and over, unable to put them into a configuration that matched what little he had learned so far.

“I always thought it odd,” Mr. Black said, affecting not to notice Will’s sudden retreat into his thoughts. “Mischa is a Lietuvian name. It was what her Ladyship planned to name her child, had your husband been born a girl.”

It was odd, indeed, and Will puzzled over it, asking, “Have you any idea why Lady Murasaki would give her daughter a name that Hannibal’s mother had chosen?”
“I am not a betting man, my Lord,” Mr. Black said with a small smile. “But were I to do so, I would put money on the chance she did not choose the name at all.”

Will felt an even deeper desire to know what she had written in her journal, and asked with uncharacteristic abruptness, “Has Mr. Price come in?”

“He has,” Mr. Black said, unperturbed. “Shall I fetch him for you, my Lord?”

“Yes, Mr. Black, if you could,” Will said, picking up the salver of cards that had piled up in their absence. “And Mr. Black?”

The butler was instantly attentive, the familiarity lost to professional reserve.

“Thank you,” Will said, smiling when the butler eased somewhat. “I would never countermand an order given by His Grace, so I appreciate your candor. I know what it is like to be lonely, and you are right—even peculiar people need love.”

“If you both are odd, my Lord,” Mr. Black, a gentle, half-suppressed smile on his face, “then I suppose put together that makes you... even?”

Will’s brows shot up and he laughed, startled. “Why, Mr. Black! I can see your humor has influenced my husband!”

“I certainly hope it has, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, bowing as he moved to ring for Jimmy. “I certainly hope it has.”

Hannibal’s feet took him to his solicitor’s office without his being aware of it, a path which was so familiar he need not even direct himself. Most of him remained behind with Will, with the shadowy form of his mate back-lit at the window when he’d chanced to look back. He had watched Hannibal go, observing from silent solitude. He wondered if Will had watched him leave Hartford in such a way all those years ago—still, unassuming, his attention unmarked. He wondered if Will would always watch him go, waiting for the inevitable moment when he would not return and leave him all alone yet again.

It led him to uncomfortable thoughts of the war, and the discussions had at the Masquerade, interspersed with dances where he treasured Will’s enjoyment all the more.

Things were not going well. Things were likely to continue not going well. He hoped and prayed that duty would not call him back to the front, but he could not guarantee it, and felt shamefully relieved Will had remained behind, if only so he could make arrangements without upsetting him for no reason.

Mr. Buddish was still in when Hannibal arrived, and greeted him with his usual perfunctory good manners.

“You just missed Mr. Berger,” he said, gesturing for Hannibal to sit. “He was here about an hour ago.”

“Was there anything of note?” Hannibal asked, settling himself in the plush, comfortable chair before his desk.

“Mr. Wells sent paperwork and a note to Lord Clarges, and you have several responses to your request for an estate manager,” Mr. Buddish said, making an impatient gesture at his secretary to bring them fresh tea. “I have compiled them for you. I intended to send them with Berger in the morning in case some stragglers came in this evening.”

“I will take them and you may send the stragglers along in shame. Has Zeller been in?” Hannibal asked, watching Mr. Buddish gather the inquiries into a tidy pile and place them into an envelope.

“I expect Mr. Zeller to report in tomorrow, according to His Grace,” Mr. Buddish said. “I’ll be sure to make a copy of his report for you.”

Hannibal fished out the letters, both his own as well as Will’s, and handed them over. “Please send these along to Hartford. And I meant to ask if you received correspondence from Grandfather concerning the disposition of the House?”

“Recently?” Mr. Buddish confirmed. “No, I haven’t. There is the original agreement he drew up that places Hartford House in your spouse’s name until such time as an Alpha male heir is born, and then the Addendum altering the specifications to any sound and living child of yours by your spouse.”

“I have requested that the Addendum be destroyed,” Hannibal said, watching Mr. Buddish go to one of his many cabinets in search of the documents. “Grandfather wrote to you some days ago with instructions to send all copies back to him. You never received anything?”

Mr. Buddish, to his credit, did a thorough check, even though they both knew that he prioritized Grandfather’s business and handled all of it personally. He shook his head, and told Hannibal, “My apologies, my Lord, but I have no such instructions and without specific notarized permission from your grandfather, I cannot allow you to lay claim to, amend, or destroy any documentation regarding Hartford House.”
“I know, the old goat didn’t want me wiggling out of his stipulations six years ago,” Hannibal said, cursing the necessity. “Things have changed, however. I want you to do an accounting of my assets, any entitlements that can be met for my spouse.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, taking notes. “Have you some particular concern?”

“Several, not the least of which is that Will should be well provided for should I be recalled to the front and not return,” Hannibal said. He was not a superstitious man by any means, but he felt as if he had somehow called the possibility to a certainty merely by mentioning it out loud. He pictured Will’s blue eyes as they had been nearly seven years ago, their brightness dimmed by hardship and cares he should never have been burdened by. “Please, gather an accounting of his own assets and the dowry he brought, as well. And I want papers drawn up to state that under any circumstances, in the event of my death, Hartford House belongs to Will without stipulation or restriction.”

“I will be sure that it is noted, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, doing so as he spoke. “Naturally, any decision His Grace makes takes precedence, but should something befall you, your wishes will be considered in the case there is an issue.”

Hannibal nodded, somber and solemn. “Grandfather said that you send back a copy of anything you register for him. He mentioned the Addendum copy has not yet arrived.”

Mr. Buddish flipped open his ledger and scanned it quickly, a frown bowing his mouth. “My Lord, the copy was sent the day after we received the Addendum itself. Have you checked with Mr. Stammets?”

“He brings everything to Grandfather like clockwork,” Hannibal said. “It is vastly disturbing for me to imagine that there is a copy of that ghastly document unaccounted for. I never want my spouse to know such a vile thing exists. He should never be troubled by it when it has no meaning any longer.”

“I will put someone on it, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, looking fairly disturbed himself. “It is not entirely unheard of for things to wander from the direct path, but never something of such importance for someone of greater importance as His Grace. I shall see to this myself.”

“Thank you, Mr. Buddish,” Hannibal said, wishing it alleviated some of his anxiety. “It is of monumental importance to me that all agreements barring Will from ownership of Hartford House be destroyed.”

“I understand, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said. “I will contact you when I have the information you’ve asked for, and when the documents have been acquired. If needs be, I will ride to Hartford myself to get His Grace’s permission to make the alterations you’ve mentioned.”

It was very little to accomplish, very little, indeed, but it was all Hannibal could manage under the circumstances and it had to suffice.

You rang for me, my Lord?” Jimmy asked, coming into the parlor and closing the panel behind him.

Will looked up from the neat stacks of cards with such an expression of horror on his face that Jimmy chuckled a little and said, “Bit much?”

“Just a bit!” Will breathed, gesturing at the cards. “These are all from today! Only from today, Jimmy!”

“Well, you are a person of some import,” Jimmy said, moving to sit next to him on the settee and glance through the cards, “and Lord Clarges knows nearly everyone in the Capital—oh! I meant to tell you there’s a package upstairs for you.”

“From whom?” Will asked, brows drawing together.

“I’m not sure. It was delivered from one of the shops today,” Jimmy said, still looking at the cards. “It’s on your vanity.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will said, somewhat flustered. “I’ll check on it when I go up to bed. I wanted to ask if you’d made any headway in the translation of Lady Murasaki’s journal?”

“Well, I might have, my Lord,” Jimmy said, hands stacked on his knee. “I made some inquiries at several smaller vendors and they directed me to the eastern end of the Capital. It seems there is an entire city within the city that represents the most amazing cultures! I really think you would enjoy seeing it, my Lord—the building structure, the signage, everything about it, it’s like stepping foot in another land without leaving the country!”

“That sounds very interesting, Jimmy,” Will said, intrigued. “Was anyone there familiar with the language?”

“The first person I asked said it was a script very close to one he used but not common here in the Capital. I wandered around for a while and saw a shop selling the most astonishing lacquer ware—it looked quite a lot like the jewelry box on your
vanity,” Jimmy said, excited by his discovery. “I went inside and the girl running the place said her grandfather could read it! She told me she would take the book to show to him and gave me this as surety for it.”

He produced a small box from his breast pocket. The size reminded Will of Anthony's cigarette case, but this box had a tiny latch and a beautiful forest scene inlaid into its face.

“She said to come back in a week for his decision,” Jimmy said, giving the box to Will so that he could inspect it. “There’s a strong possibility that he won’t do it, but she said she would try her best. I might have hinted at generous compensation for his time.”

“More than generous, if he can translate it,” Will said, handing it back to Jimmy and telling him, “Please put this with Lady Murasaki’s jewelry box and be sure that both are packed when we prepare to leave. I will not offer offense by misplacing something which was made with such care by a master craftsman.”

“I will make sure of it, my Lord,” Jimmy said, tucking it securely away. He stood to go but stopped, fishing something from his other jacket pocket. “Berger came from the solicitor’s about an hour ago and brought this for you. There was a packet of paperwork with it that I put on your desk upstairs.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will said, taking it from him to see who had sent it.

“I think I’ll pop off to do some shopping, if it’s alright with you?” Jimmy asked, pausing at the door. “You're nearly out of scent blocker. I meant to pick it up yesterday but with all the excitement it just slipped my mind.”

“Oh, Jimmy, wait,” Will said, pondering for a moment. “Even with the scent blockers and tonics, Hannibal still seems to catch my scent... I have the sneaking suspicion that my suppressants aren't working very well anymore.”

Jimmy's mouth puckered in concern. “Mr. Bainbridge, the man who sells to us, did mention that they would grow increasingly ineffective over time.”

Will frowned, wondering why he was even considering the suggestion currently fluttering around in his head.

“I was thinking perhaps I might... not use anything for a little while,” Will said, a flush coloring his cheeks as he said it, resisting the lifelong conditioning that warned him such dedicated exposure to an Alpha was affecting his thinking, that deep down he was being nothing more than a brainless Omega hoping his scent would bind an Alpha to him. The excuse that Hannibal caught his scent seemed so flimsy as to be embarrassing, just the sort of reasoning an Omega would use.

He nearly took his statement back, the thought was so powerful and so upsetting, and opened his mouth to do so.

“How about,” Jimmy said, hitting on the crux of the issue from long familiarity with Will and reading the sudden panic on his face, “we just... give it some time and see how it goes?”

Will looked at him, surprised, but was reassured by Jimmy's sincere smile.

“If you decide you don’t like how it makes you feel,” Jimmy went on, “then I will go right out and we’ll get you started with another brand. How does that sound?”

Will smiled, relieved how Jimmy could always find the right thing to say. “Thank you, Jimmy. Please, go ahead and go out if you wish. It’s a pleasant evening and should be enjoyed.”

The valet excused himself, leaving Will alone in the parlor with his weighty thoughts and the worrisome calling cards. He rubbed his eyes, nervous to think that he would no longer be hiding behind the screen of his products.

Scent was something his father had remarked on with a sneer, though Will had never used suppressants or blockers in his keeping, nor been forced it. Rather, his father had seemed to relish being able to point it out and remark on it.

But Hannibal...

He thought of how his husband had looked last night, a horned Ravenstag nuzzling the blue silk of his garter and sighing as if he had never been given anything so pleasing in his life.

And afterward, the kiss they had shared that had left him aching for more, the way Hannibal touched him and breathed him in like a starving man seeking nourishment. Perhaps it wasn’t his Omegan nature misleading him into using his wiles.

Perhaps it was the simple fact that it was a part of him, and he had no need to hide it from his husband now that so much of their future was at stake.

The thought calmed him somewhat and left him more confident in his decision to allow the suppressants to work out of his system. As Jimmy said, if he felt strange or too vulnerable, he could always restart a new and better product with little trouble.
Content to leave that decision where it stood for now, Will turned to the letter Jimmy had given him, one ear trained on the door to catch Hannibal’s return even though he had only just left.

Mr. Wells had written to inform Will that the crew was prepared to begin digging for the plumbing as early as tomorrow, and they had permission to tie into Moseley’s gas supply if they wished to fit Marsham for lighting.

With such concrete issues before him, Will was able to distract himself from the pile of visitors’ cards and the vague sense of restlessness that rose in Hannibal’s absence as well as the promise of the journal’s translation. He did some rough estimates and refined them some, losing himself in the details. The details were his specialty, where he could forget the world for a time and deal with things which could not dissemble.

He was so absorbed in his work he almost didn’t register the commotion happening at the front door. When the ruckus finally penetrated his awareness, his heart leapt thinking Hannibal had returned. It sank once again, however, when he heard shouting.

“Let me through!”

Will caught the wood smoke and leather scent of Francis Dolarhyde just as it began to sharpen to sulfur with the force of his anger.

Before he could rise and find out the problem, the parlor door opened and Francis poured in on a wave of anxious upset, Mr. Black and two footmen in his wake and vainly trying to restrain him.

“Lord Clarges!” Francis said, his voice harsh and raw from shouting. He pulled against the other men so hard Will feared for their safety and surged to his feet, calling, “Stand down! Let him go!”

They did so, and Francis flung himself forward, stumbling to a stop before Will, shuddering with the force of his panting breath.

“You all may go,” Will said, more abrupt with them than was his habit, but he did not wish for any more witnesses to Francis’ outrageous behavior than there already were.

“Your Lordship... person nearly broke in the servants’ entrance!” Mr. Black said, affronted that the dignity of Chelsea House would be tried so greatly. “When that accomplished nothing, he came through the front door! The front door of this house!”

“I apologize on his behalf,” Will said, shooing them away. “I deeply regret any trouble he has caused. He is not used to service. Please, go back to your duties. I will handle this situation.”

With obvious reluctance, Mr. Black and the two footmen retreated and Will closed the door. He took a moment to compose himself, the brimstone scent fading to leather as Francis calmed, though he trembled like a beast facing slaughter, his blue eyes wide and wild.

Without saying a word, Will returned to his seat and took up his pen, pointedly ignoring the Alpha in the middle of the room. His thoughts were too scattered now to continue, but Francis need not know that, and after a few moments of stewing on his own behavior, Francis said, “I could not find you.”

Will dabbed the pen into his inkwell before he said, “You have found me now.”

Francis shifted, head dropping in contrition.

“Would you please explain to me, Francis,” Will said, writing a few lines of notes before he forgot them entirely, “why you felt compelled to terrorize the good people of this house with your actions?”

“Lord Clarges,” Francis said, taking a deep, rasping breath, “I was frightened something had happened to you when I could not find you.”

Will put his writing things away, still not looking at Francis. When he finished, he turned in his chair and folded his hands in his lap before pinning Mr. Dolarhyde with a stern, unyielding stare.

“Something did happen to me,” Will told him. “I went a full twenty-four hours without anything in the world to trouble me, including the unacceptable behavior of a man I have brought into my household!”

Francis’ head tipped down further, his shoulders slumping but his fists clenching.

“Honestly, Francis! You vanished from Marsham Heath without a word to me about it, forcing me to attempt to excuse your behavior to my husband, who is already disposed to view you unfavorably—”
“I could not find you!” Francis cut in, the words an explosion of anguish. He looked at Will, his blue eyes swimming with distress. “I thought something had happened to you! Have you any idea what would become of me?”

The unsteady agitation that gripped him caused Will to abandon his irritation for concern. “What do you mean, Francis? Why should anything happen to you?”

“I can’t allow you to suffer,” Francis said, his voice falling to a harsh whisper. He dropped to his knees before Will and moved as if he would take Will’s hand, only drawing back at the last moment to breathe, “I could not live if something were to happen to you...”

Will shifted in the chair, but there was nowhere to go with Francis’ large body before him. The nervousness that always rode beneath the surface of his surety in Francis came to the surface, fluttering wings of panic beneath his ribs he refused to acknowledge.

“What are you saying, Francis?” he asked, a dreadful, unhappy certainty blooming in his Gift. This was no servant before him, no soul dedicated to his safety. This was—

Francis raised his blue eyes to Will’s, saying on a ragged exhale, “Don’t you know?”

Of course he knew. He knew it to the depths of himself, the same unwholesome tragedy that had overcome him six years before under the bright morning sun on a day that should have been perfect.

“No,” he whispered, shaking his head in denial of it. He stood then, the chair sliding away and falling over with the force of his retreat. “No!”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” Francis said, turning to follow Will with his eyes as he paced away, putting distance between them, still shaking his head as if he could somehow negate what Francis was telling him through sheer willpower. “When you were little—”

“No!” Will said, pointing at him, a staying gesture better suited for a dog. “Do not tell me this!”

“That day when I left,” Francis said, lunging to his feet. “What else could I do?”

“I cannot hear this!” Will said, lowering his voice to a trembling whisper. “Francis, you cannot say such things!”

Francis trembled, a shudder tracing his large frame. “It happened and there’s nothing to be done for it.”

Will closed his eyes, blocking out the sight of him, wishing he could block out the rest just as easily.

“You were in so much pain,” Francis said, the tread of his boots quiet on the thick rug. “I didn’t know what was happening until it was too late. The moment I picked you up, I felt—”

“No,” Will whispered, but it was meaningless, an empty sound that solved nothing, did nothing but hold the truth at a distance without changing it.

“Every time you hurt,” Francis said, intruding on the darkness behind Will’s eyes. “Every time you wept, every time you suffered, I could feel it... and still do.”

Will drew a breath that was sour with Dolarhyde’s smoky scent, churning his stomach in response.

“You don’t really remember?”

“I don’t,” Will said, as much to reinforce it to himself as to Francis. “I was too young—”

Francis inhaled sharply and said, “What you father did to you that day is what triggered it.”

“Don’t—” Will insisted, shaking his head violently again, not wanting the reminders, not wanting to think of it.

“Dressed to match,” Francis said, pushing ahead while Will dug his heels in, not wanting to revisit that moment. “There was no telling you apart except by scent. Two precious angels in frothy frocks riding ponies in a little parade... You remember. You must remember.”

“Yes,” Will admitted, the pain in his heart cracking his voice. “Yes, Francis... I remember.”

“Mina cried,” Francis whispered, and Will sensed him move closer. He opened his eyes and stepped backwards, not wanting the Alpha near him, especially feeling fragile as he was. “Your sisters screamed... and your father left you there where he dropped you.”

Like garbage.

The unwelcome completion of that sentence in Will’s thoughts made him flinch, the child in him reduced to so much human detritus, insignificant and meaningless. It woke a physical pain in him like the dull throb in his hip that ached in the cold. His sisters’ screaming and Iris’ pale, shocked face and a shadow that loomed over him...
“You carried me home,” Will breathed, recalling it now, his gaze lifting in surprise. “You carried me all the way back to the house and took me to the nursery.”

‘Don’t fret, Mr. Graham, I’ve got you...’

Younger, slimmer, and simmering with outrage, but he’d been gentle with Will even in his anger and his assurances had calmed him despite the frightening pain he’d been in.

“I wanted to protect you, but I couldn’t,” Francis said, the words thick with anger. “You never cried, not once. You were so brave, and so helpless, and I couldn’t save you.”

Tears sheened Will’s eyes unexpectedly. Tears which were long overdue, gratitude for kindness the child he’d been had never expected and the adult he was still marveled over.

“I couldn’t protect you from your father,” Francis quietly insisted, his earnest, imploring glance nearly undoing Will all over again. “I couldn’t... I couldn’t remain. I couldn’t face a situation I couldn’t change in your favor.”

“You were kind to me,” Will breathed, trembling. “It was neither expected nor deserved, but you were, and you were punished for your kindness with such a terrible connection. How do I thank you for what you did for me without legitimizing the result?”

Francis stared at him, drinking in the details of his features, his longing for acknowledgment almost palpable. But it was an acknowledgment that Will simply could not give.

“We can never speak of this again, Francis,” Will whispered, straightening to his full height, shoulders squared. “If you have any desire to remain near me, never speak of this again.”

Francis said nothing, but Will could see in his tension that he wanted to, wanted to unleash his Alpha temper and speak his mind.

The fact that he didn't brought Will to say, “I will hold this in confidence, Mr. Dolarhyde. If you speak it, if you say it, then I will have no choice but to tell my husband. As it stands, I will dismiss this as an excess of passion borne of your fear and we will never speak of this again.”

Those bright blue eyes flicked up, surprise and wariness in their depths.

“I know how difficult such a thing is,” Will said, doing his best to allow his understanding to soften him too much. Shared experience did not, he knew, mean a similar one, and he could not afford to allow Francis to hope. “You must understand that we will never progress past this point.”

Francis searched his face, finding more in his statement than Will meant to offer.

“I know it cannot,” he said, relaxing his tense posture and dropping his gaze again, hiding his thoughts from Will’s sharp eyes. “It cannot be undone, except through death.”

The statement drew troubling conclusions from Will. Softly, he asked, “You believe that if I die, you might as well?”

Francis was slow to answer, but when he did, it was with a nod. “When you have suffered, I have felt it so keenly. I know with complete certainty that we will die together, Lord Clarges, you and I.”

A cold chill swept down Will’s spine, a river of dread lifting the fine hairs on his nape and making him shudder.

“I am sorry this happened to you, Francis,” he said, and genuinely meant it. His mouth tightened, determination hardening him to Francis’ awful circumstances. His voice was even with grim calm when he said, “Let me assure you, I have no intentions of dying anytime soon.”

“Nor will you,” Francis said, straightening to his full height and putting every ounce of formidable Alpha threat in his voice when he added, “I swear to you that as long as I am near, you will not suffer.”

Will studied him for a long moment, but what he saw there did no more to reassure him than Francis’ harsh, growling promise.

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Hannibal came home with anticipation, eager to rejoin his mate, but was instead greeted with the unwelcome and unwholesome scent of Francis Dolarhyde permeating the air. He knew just by Mr. Black’s pinched, unhappy expression that the Alpha servant had not behaved well, and inwardly wondered how on earth he could best separate his mate from Dolarhyde with minimal disruption to everyone’s peace of mind.
“His Lordship is in the parlor,” Mr. Black said, taking his coat, hat, and gloves.

“Has he made any headway in the cards?” Hannibal asked, knowing well enough what an impossible task that was.

“When last I checked on him, he seemed quite flummoxed, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, tending to Hannibal’s items with the greatest of dignity. “I have taken the liberty of preparing tea.”

“Just the thing, I should think,” Hannibal said, and moved through the quiet house to the parlor where Will was picking through the cards, looking unimpressed and, to Hannibal’s eye, somewhat bored.

“May I join you?” Hannibal asked, his scent reaching Will long before his voice. The way Will looked up at him, pleasure and relief blooming in his blue eyes, made Hannibal’s heart lurch. It was a pleasant sensation, he found—more of a soar than a fall, though it felt equally as exhilarating.

“Please do,” Will said, clearing a place next to him on the settee, a smile of welcome on his full mouth. “I recognize few of these names, and most I do recognize are only from the Society column. I have no basis from which to make decisions regarding them.”

“Oh, for the most part,” Hannibal said, settling next to him and eyeing the cards, shuffling them somewhat, “I just let Black handle them. Most are merely from courtesy and curiosity. Were there any invitations to tempt you?”

Will shook his head, somewhat abashed. “I find that last hour here in the parlor has been the most relaxing of the day.”

Hannibal smiled and reached out to stroke his cheek, noting the tired cast to Will’s eyes and how pale he seemed. He was warm to touch again, warmer than he should be, and weary from plunging headfirst in a lifestyle he was not used to.

“Well, perhaps we should stay in,” Hannibal said, his voice soft and coaxing. He slipped his hand up into Will’s hair, smoothing his curls. Will’s lids dropped in response to the soothing and Hannibal’s breathing evened out, matching the slow, steady rise and fall of Will’s chest. He could see the soft throb of Will’s heartbeat in his throat and knew it beat in time with his own.

Should Will give him the opportunity to bond with him, Alpha to Omega, it would be a bond to end all bonds, he knew. The powerful pull between them had the flavor of fate, but he refused to be a star-crossed lover. He would give this wonderful, brave, and brilliant Omega the happily-ever-after he deserved.

Even if Hannibal himself might not be permitted to be part of it.

“The pleasures of the Capital can wait,” Hannibal murmured, dropping his hand to Will’s so he could lift it and kiss his knuckles. “You are still recovering, after all, and there is always tomorrow.”

Will released a soft exhale of relief, wondering, “After so much enjoyment in the Capital, I find myself longing for the peaceful quiet of Marsham Heath, or the familiar, aged safety of Hartford. There is so much noise here and so many people.”

“People,” Hannibal said, kissing Will’s hand again and returning to the cards, “are an acquired taste, and you have yet to acquire it. Give it time, Will. It will come. The right people will never drain you.”

“You don’t drain me,” Will said, shifting to sit up straighter when Mr. Black admitted himself with a tea-tray in hand.

Hannibal smiled at his admission, gesturing for Mr. Black to leave the tray so he could pour for them both. “I count myself as one of the lucky ones, in that case.”

“I suppose you must have noticed,” Will said, taking his cup when Hannibal offered it. He sipped the tea with relish, feeling it warm him all the way to his bones. “Francis has returned.”

“He does have a certain air about him,” Hannibal said, his nose wrinkling in response. “Did he cause a fuss? Black looked as thunderous as a storm cloud on my entry.”

“He was rather rowdy, almost beside himself with worry,” Will said, setting his cup carefully into the saucer. “He was frightened I was not where he had left me.”

“He does understand that we must all live our lives regardless of his approval?” Hannibal asked, displeasure in every syllable. “It is no fault of yours he left without explanation. Did he give an explanation?”

“I did not press for one,” Will said, troubled when he thought of the twisted bond Francis had all but admitted to. Knowing now what he did, he had no choice but to keep the Alpha at a distance until further separation could be ordered. “He was far too agitated. I am considering how best I may return him to my sister’s care. It would be much easier were we to have any indication of who is responsible for attempting to murder me. Perhaps then he would not feel so deeply compelled to protect me.”
“I have every hope and expectation that with the detectives on the case, whoever they are will be brought to justice with all speed,” Hannibal said, hoping to lighten Will’s mood some. “It relieves me to hear you speak of separating yourself from Dolarhyde. There is something about him which I cannot like.”

Will sipped his tea again, wondering if Hannibal could somehow sense the twisted nature of Francis’ connection to him or if his own bond to Hannibal somehow prevented it altogether. There seemed to be some sort of sensitivity there, or perhaps it was simply that both of them were Alphas, in the end.

Will opted to change the subject to one less dangerous, and asked, “How did you find Mr. Buddish.”

“He wasn’t that well hidden, as it turns out,” Hannibal said, grinning when Will cut a repressive, amused look at him. “Berger had beaten me there, but I did drop off our letters to be posted. There were several responses to my advertisement for the estate manager’s position.”

Will’s smile amusement turned strained and unhappy, belying his light tone when he asked, “Are you still so determined to replace me?”

“No, I’m not determined to replace you, Will,” Hannibal assured him. “Quite the opposite, in fact. I am trying to free you from your obligations in order to saddle you with others.”

“And what obligations are those?” Will asked, relaxing somewhat.

“Being Lord Clarges, of course,” Hannibal told him, grinning.

Will’s tension melted and he ruefully admitted, “It seems to be more time-consuming than I first assumed it would be. Perhaps as Lord Clarges I will be very busy, in truth. We shall certainly have enough to occupy the both of us at Marsham Heath.”

“Mr. Buddish mentioned you had a letter from Mr. Wells,” Hannibal said, sipping his tea. “Any headway on your project?”

“Yes, the crew is assembled to begin digging,” Will told him, perking up at the mention of the renovations. “And we can hook up to Moseley’s gas source, but I was thinking we need to have a larger reserve tank so we can replace the coal boilers with gas ones. I—what are you smiling at?”

Hannibal, caught in the very act, said, “You.”

“What on earth for?” Will asked, amused.

“Because you are brilliant and beautiful and clever about things I haven’t the aptitude for,” Hannibal told him, and leaned over to kiss the tip of his nose. “And because I am lucky to know you.”

“Nonsense,” Will declared it, and proceeded to explain his plans to Hannibal, but his cheeks stayed rosy with pleasure and a smile curved his full mouth.

The discussion required delving into the packet that Mr. Wells had sent and they went to Will’s room to get comfortable.

Dinner was served there informally off of a cart while they finalized their plans and moved on to the question of the new estate manager.

Somewhere between the wine, the delicious food, and discussing their plans, Will realized something.

He was happy.

It came to him quietly, without fanfare. He realized what it was when he was shuffling through the applications and Hannibal leaned across him to pour them both more wine. There was something in the scent of his husband’s skin, in the way Hannibal was so far into his space without overpowering him, in the easy way he smiled as he poured and how the cords of his neck stood out in his throat, his neckerchief and jacket discarded hours before. Or something in the graceful bend of his surprisingly slender wrists, the elegant way in which he moved even when not on the dance floor.

Somewhere in the sum of all those things, doing something so routine as managing the household affairs together, happiness wove itself into the web of Will’s world and it had the shape and scent of Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal glanced at him and saw his soft smile. He returned it with one of his own, saying nothing. He didn’t have to—Will could feel Hannibal’s contentment through his bond and it filled him, equal to his own but not influencing it, as he had once feared his husband might be able to do.

They were in the Capital and there were any number of things Hannibal could be doing, from gaming at his club to attending the theater. Yet here he was at Will’s side, relaxed and comfortable and radiating nothing but happiness, as if there was no place else he would rather be than in this room right here and right now.
Will found he couldn’t concentrate on the papers anymore and tidied them with care, basking in their closeness.

“We can take these with us back to Marsham,” he said, sliding the sheaf of inquiries back into the envelope. “I’m eager to get back and get started on the renovations.”

“We can leave tomorrow, as you please,” Hannibal told him, watching him move, graceful in every gesture. His mate’s driving need to be productive, to be engaged in positive activity for the betterment of those they were responsible for was just another facet of his personality that delighted and impressed Hannibal. He could easily imagine the days stretching into months and years of being with Will just like this, in conversation and planning, in shared wine and shared ideas and shared smiles.

Hannibal hoped with all of his heart that when Will did decide, he would do so in his favor, and let their potential become a reality.

“I think I would feel more at ease were we to do so,” Will admitted, sitting back with his wine and taking a sip. “I hate to leave here so suddenly. My time in Chelsea House has been so pleasant, like something from a dream.”

“Well,” Hannibal said, leaning forward to take Will’s hand in his and kiss his fingertips, then his knuckles, a small smile playing around his lips. “It is a dream which will always be here waiting for you, Will. The pleasures of the city are many and varied; it is best to explore them slowly, lest they lose their charm.”

“Is that what you’re doing with me?” Will asked, one dark brow shooting up. “Exploring me slowly lest I lose my charm?”

Hannibal grinned and turned Will’s hand to press a kiss to his wrist where his pulse throbbed beneath the surface of his skin and his faint scent strengthened somewhat.

“On the contrary,” he murmured, lips brushing against Will’s wrist so make him shiver, a small and stifled movement that went deeper than Will could properly rein in. “I am savoring every unfolding flavor of my complex and surprising mate as he allows me to. The journey is every bit as enjoyable as the destination, in your case.”

Part of him hoped Will would take heed of his suggestion and invite him to stay, to share a few more hours before they both were too exhausted to do anything more than sleep.

It was disappointing when Will gently disengaged his hand, but Hannibal’s heart thundered with joy to see the blush on his cheeks and the smile on his lips. His desire to get closer to his mate was not one-sided, and he looked forward to a time when he might be able to hold Will through the night, kiss the slender column of his throat, treasure him with every breath in him for as long as life granted him time.

“It must be late,” Will said, brushing his hair back behind his ear, warmed by his husband’s gentle coaxing.

Hannibal fished his pocket watch out and noted the time.

It was not the hour he spoke which surprised Will, but the sight of his blue garter threaded through the chain of Hannibal’s watch and tied securely, a bright, incongruent blue in the golden firelight.

“Hannibal!” he said, shocked, his eyes wide.

“Hm?” Hannibal glanced up, saw his reaction, and grinned. “What? My Courtier gave me a favor. I should carry it with me always, don’t you think?”

“Not in public!” Will said, horrified, but laughter threatened to break through his scolding. “You cannot be brandishing my garter each time you check your watch!”

“Nonsense, it was a gift,” Hannibal protested. “I can brandish it whenever I like! Besides, what if I were to suddenly catch sight of your knees? What chance would I stand in that case without it? This way, I have a part of you with me wherever I go.”

Will’s protest fell to a fond smile. He wished he could decide then and there, just let everything fall away to the past and be at Hannibal’s side in person rather than vicariously, but he couldn’t. Not yet. Deep in his secret heart lay doubts he dared not stir, resentments that would, perhaps, never die. He refused to be impulsive in this with so much at stake and so much to lose.

“Honestly,” he breathed, waving a hand at it. “You’re incorrigible, Hannibal.”

“Absolutely,” Hannibal said, grinning. He got to his feet and bent over Will, stooping to kiss his forehead. Will longed for another kiss like those they had shared before, but hesitated to initiate it now, without the excitement of the ball to embolden him. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the soft kiss on his forehead, on the tip of his nose, and then on his hand, only opening his eyes when his husband said, “Sleep tight, Will. Get all the rest you need.”
“Goodnight, Hannibal,” Will said, reluctant to let him go but knowing it was for the best. Still, how empty the room felt once Hannibal left, casting a smile Will's way. Will hugged himself in a vain attempt at comfort, but only for a moment before he forced his hands to drop, breathing, “You are not so weak, Will Graham!”

But he questioned if it was truly weakness, or his bond, or simply what happened when someone turned out to be unexpectedly interesting, and gallant, and amusing, and thoughtful, and so very eager for his company.

Cold and uncertain, he undressed with his thoughts a million miles away, a half-heard chuckle escaping him when he recalled how Hannibal had stared at his knee as if it had challenged him to a duel.

‘If I were to be daily driven from rational thought by the sight of your garters, Will, then I would count myself a lucky man...’

He tugged his nightshirt on with a sigh, bare toes curled in protest against the cold floor. He left his clothes neatly laid within the wardrobe for Jimmy to collect come morning and went to his vanity to place his own watch in its box, idly musing if he should ask Hannibal for something of his and return the favor.

When he reached his vanity, however, he found a rather large box marked Gideon and Garnets waiting pushed back out of notice and remembered that Jimmy had mentioned he'd been sent a package.

Never one to deny his curiosity for long, Will opened the box and gaped in surprise at the contents.

It was entirely filled with an assortment of watches. Silver watches, gold-inlaid watches, crystal-faced watches and those with open faces, some bejeweled, others deceptively plain until the etching was noted—there was a watch to please even the pickiest shopper.

And for some reason they were all sitting in a box on Will's vanity.

“Hannibal,” he called, hearing him in the washroom, the splash of water in the sink marking his usual evening routine of washing his face and cleaning his teeth and tending his nails. He was remarkably fussy about his nails, Will had discovered.

He crossed to the washroom and knocked, saying again, “Hannibal?”

“Yes?” Hannibal called, and when Will opened the door he was confronted with the sight of his husband in a distracting state of undress, scrubbing his face over the basin. When he straightened, reaching for a towel, Will saw why—he had pulled his stitches, the red seam of his wound angry from the abuse.

“I waited a bit longer than I should have,” Hannibal said, rubbing his face with the towel and drying his hands, questions in his amber eyes. His shirt was off, his pants loosened at his waist. Will stared at his exposed chest and the thick hair there. A droplet of water coursed down the length of his throat and was caught, a glittering diamond in a forest of silver. “Do you need the accommodation?”

“No,” Will said, and turned to gesture vaguely at his vanity, annoyed when his eyes refused to follow the direction his head attempted to turn. Aggravated only with himself, he asked, “Why are those watches in my room? Have we robbed Mr. Gideon?”

“No,” Hannibal laughed, blotting the stinging little needle marks where the stitches had gone in. He tossed the towel aside, his shoulders back a touch, his spine straightening just a bit, the Alpha in him unable to resist highlighting the fact that he was in his prime and very much available.

It was a fact certainly not lost on Will.

“Mr. Gideon suggested you might like one,” Hannibal said, “or two, or all of them.”

“I-I don’t need all of them, thank you,” Will said, firmly getting a grip on himself and dragging his eyes up to meet Hannibal’s, bristling when he saw the amusement there.

“Don’t be thoughtful,” Hannibal chided, finding it hard not to stare in return, beautiful as he was in his loose nightshirt with his hair falling in tousled curls around his ears. “A gentleman can never have too many watches.”

“I have a watch,” Will said, noticing his belly, which was perfectly trim with just a hint of softness. He swallowed hard, and added, “It’s a very nice watch.”

Hannibal reached for the nightshirt he’d hung behind the door and pulled it on. When he took a step towards him, Will refused to take a step back.

“It is a remarkable watch,” Will went on, resenting the way the shirt covered his husband's fine physique from view. “It is my favorite watch.”
“Are you hoping to dissuade me by extolling the many splendors of your watch?” Hannibal murmured, reaching out slowly to touch Will's cheek.

“Don't be ridiculous, I have no need to dissuade you from anything,” Will said, and he almost believed it. Almost.

“You need a few watches, Will, for different occasions. For work, for court—”

“Court?”

“—for social outings,” Hannibal said, chuckling at the horrified look on Will's face. Relenting, he said, “Keep whichever among them appeals to you, Will. I only wanted to give you a gift.”

“Why?” Will asked.

The question held so much disbelief it broke Hannibal's heart. Of course his mate would ask why he was being given a gift, gifts being so rare to him. They were only ever the result of another year of empty waiting, another holiday spent in a silent house refusing any company.

“That is a question which has many answers, Will,” Hannibal said, cupping his cheek to smooth his thumb beneath Will's eye. “Because you need them. Because I want to give you things you might like or enjoy... but really it all boils down to me being selfish.”

“Selfish?” Will asked, pressing into Hannibal's hand only a fraction. “How is giving me gifts being selfish?”

“Because it gives me great pleasure to see you enjoying something that I made possible,” Hannibal purred, tipping his head to nuzzle Will, inhaling the faint scent of his skin on a content breath. “There is so much I would like to make possible for you, Will.”

His mouth drew a teasing trail down Will's temple to the corner of his mouth and he placed a soft kiss on Will's parted lips.

Will blinked hard, trying to wake himself to some form of rational thought, surprised to find he was as rational now as he had ever been in his life.

And he didn't want to sleep alone.

“Hannibal,” he said, breathing his name on another kiss, both hands lifting to cup his jaw. “Hannibal...”

“I've been wanting to do this all day,” Hannibal whispered, his hand falling from Will's cheek to settle at his waist, his other arm curving behind Will's back to pull him close. The heat of him chased away the chill of the cold tiles, the chill of the loneliness that had settled on Will in the silence of his room. There was no place for such in the slow tease of his tongue or the way he drew on Will's lip, suckling the plump fullness to nip him with sharp teeth.

Will tangled one hand in Hannibal's hair, the fine, silky sensation of it on his skin adding its own layer of pleasure. His body curved against Hannibal's on its own, seeking the heat and pressure of him, not content to have any space between them.

“Hannibal,” he said, his thoughts getting lost when he slipped his tongue past his husband's lips to feel those sharp teeth on its tip. His vivid imagination easily considered a thousand ways he could feel those teeth on him and he moaned, drawing back to pant harshly, his forehead pressed to Hannibal's and both of them quivering with desire.

His blue eyes met Hannibal's own amber gaze, smoky with hunger but tempered with the understanding that his flesh was willing, but his heart begged for caution.

“I cannot give you more than this, Hannibal,” Will said, the words almost lost on a shaky exhale, his nerves defeating his attempt to explain his fears.

Hannibal kissed him again, soft and sweet.

“I would never ask for more,” he whispered, his grip on Will easing, hands stroking his taut back and the slender sweep of his side, “when you have already given me everything I need.”

Will's lips parted, but he could not speak to what was moving inside of him because he could feel the truth of it through his bond to Hannibal. His husband meant it, believed it, was earnest in his sincerity.

“The rest,” Hannibal said, his chest filled to bursting with tenderness for the young Omega in his arms, “will always be yours to choose.”

Will held his gaze for a long moment before he pulled away. Solemn and fragile, he trailed a slow kiss over the healing slash on Hannibal's high cheek, gentle apology in every soft press of his lips.
Holding his husband's gaze, he stepped back only enough to grasp both of Hannibal's hands in his own before he moved back into his room, tugging Hannibal with him with a small, shy smile.

**Chapter 30**

Will drew Hannibal to his bed in silence, a quietly-determined shadow back-lit by the single bedside lamp he'd left burning. Hannibal stayed when Will let him go, watching him move to turn the covers back. He was always so effortlessly beautiful, a masterpiece of symmetry, grace, and goodness. There was no art in the world which could compare to him in Hannibal's eyes, no fortune that could come to a man which would be greater than the steady gaze of his blue eyes from beneath thick black lashes and the small smile curving his full mouth.

And the heart that had suffered so much hardship but still had the bravery to try and try again despite the blows it had been dealt; it was a precious gift which Hannibal was not about to squander.

Will turned out the light and slid into his bed, listening to Hannibal shed the pants he still wore and to the soft tread of his bare feet on the rug as he came to the bed. He closed his eyes when the mattress sank, every sense keyed to his husband's presence—his warm, earthy aroma and his heat, the faint glide of the blankets over his skin as he slipped into the bed next to Will.

It was the first touch, however, that made Will's heart leap up in his chest.

Hannibal's long, sensitive fingers found his side beneath the blankets, tracing the curve of his hip through his nightshirt. The brush of his touch pulsed through Will's body and coiled in his groin, heavy and immediate. Passions left slumberous for so long Will had once doubted they could ever be roused woke yet again as Hannibal's hand slid up his belly, his strong arm folding over Will's side, his muscular body coming to rest against his back.

The air was thick with Hannibal's Alpha scent, heavy with the musky flavor of desire. Will pulled it into his lungs as far as he could, another frisson of excitement running through him when his round backside was snugly and firmly tucked into the cup of Hannibal's groin. Hannibal nuzzled his curls and squeezed him close, curling around him with the purring satisfaction of a great, sleek cat.

Will slid his hand back, cupping his palm over Hannibal's hip, the flex and shift of muscle beneath his touch speaking to the effect he had on his husband. He wondered if such would happen anywhere he touched Hannibal, but pushed the thought away to simply tug on him, urging him closer, wanting the comforting press of being so fully engulfed in his strength.

Hannibal closed his eyes and drew in Will's scent, recognizing by instinct the smoky edge that it held. He shifted and ducked his head, testing the soft place behind Will's perfect ear, down the curve of his jaw to his throat, his neck so graceful and perfect it would put swans to shame. He didn't mean to follow the trail with kisses, but somehow he found himself doing so, kissing each place he scented as he went.

Will tipped his head up, turning in Hannibal's arms to roll onto his back, a soft sound of contentment escaping him when Hannibal rolled against him, half-pinning him in his eager exploration. He could feel the thrilling, weighty bulk of his husband between his thighs, roused with appreciation, but there was no expectation in it, only honest and natural responsiveness as great as Will's own.

Hannibal drew back enough to stroke Will's cheek, sheer Alpha pleasure filling him when his sturdy little mate caught his wrist and held it, scenting him, leaving a gentle bite more a rub of his Omegan fangs than anything. When he lowered his head, Will found his throat and did the same, holding Hannibal still to taste him.

They twined together on his bed, learning one another in a way no words could offer—scent, taste, touch, the texture of one another's skin, the places where the perfume of their bodies lay strongest. It was a pleasure all its own, this exploration, latent impulses awakening in response to touch and scent. There was no part of Will's throat, collarbone, jaw, wrists, or hands left untouched, nor any part of Hannibal's in return. Under the heavy blankets in the muffled darkness, they drew each other in, sensitive and awed, tender and gentle with the promise of what might be. Time seemed to cease, the world shrinking down to include just the two of them, kiss-damp and languorous in their mutual adoration.
Eventually, Will succumbed to his exhaustion, succumbed to the comfort of being thoroughly marked and marking in return. With his husband’s warm mouth and heavy fangs gently raking his jaw, Will’s last thought before relentless sleep finally overtook him was that he could have this for the rest of his life.

And all he had to do was say yes.

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The terror Will had felt in the mire of his doubt and distrust after his fall seemed a lifetime ago when he woke in his husband’s arms, curled securely in the curve of Hannibal’s body. He shifted, yawning a little and stretching his legs toward the foot of the bed before tucking back up, reluctant to emerge from this warm cocoon into the cold world.

The skin of his throat felt chafed and sore, but the sensation brought a smile to his lips, calling to mind his husband purring against him and sucking on his throat as if he could not resist the urge to draw Will’s skin between his teeth.

It left him pleasantly appreciative, much as they’d both been last night. Will wasn’t entirely sure, given his profound response just to Hannibal’s Alpha marking, if he would be safe even should he decide to remove Hannibal from his life. There would still need to be a child for the Lecter line, and that would require they come together once, at minimum. Perhaps he might find it too much for his bond in the end, and burn himself up in the heat of his husband’s passion.

Hannibal shifted behind him and settled against his back. He woke slowly, some parts of him more quickly than others, Will realized, firm as his backside was against his husband. Hannibal pressed tighter to him in his half-sleep and burrowed his nose into Will’s fragrant curls, his arm coiling up beneath Will’s to press against his chest.

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, as if afraid to wake him. “You should go before Jimmy comes.”

Hannibal squeezed him close, the sharp throb of desire banking down to softer pleasures, like the tickle of Will’s curls, the easy sound of his breathing, the minute movements of his body as he wriggled so delightfully.

“Remind me,” he whispered, waking to blissful relaxation from snuggling so close to his mate, “to buy you more gifts.”

Will uttered a soft, raspy laugh, asking, “And tell me why I should?”

“So you can come to scold me,” Hannibal said, chuckling when Will did, the vibration of their shared laughter rumbling through them both, “and I can seduce you into bringing me to your bed.”

“You think you seduced me?” Will asked, snorting a little and burrowing back against his husband, the hand tucked against his chest cupping him, fingers tracing idle, distracting circles.

“I do,” Hannibal said, unable to resist grinning. “You were overcome by my masculine charms.”

Will’s laughter was throaty and deep as he rolled in Hannibal’s embrace onto his back to face his pleased, grinning husband.

“Your masculine charms?” he repeated, not entirely able to ignore the way Hannibal’s hand drifted down to rest on his belly, large and strong and dangerous. “I would not say you have seduced me quite yet, Hannibal.”

Will’s heart skipped a beat at the purring promise in his husband’s words when Hannibal asked, “Is that a challenge?”

“Do you think you would win if it were?” Will asked, wetting his lips. He pushed up on his elbow and loomed over Hannibal in the strong morning light, the heat of his breath stirring against Hannibal’s lips.

“I think I would happily die trying,” Hannibal whispered, letting Will’s weight push him onto his back. “Or being strangled by your marvelous thighs.”

“One of these days you may know just how marvelous my thighs really are,” Will told him, a hint of laughter in his soft voice, the thighs in question sliding against Hannibal’s, legs tangled beneath the sheets and blankets. A deep, satisfied moan escaped Hannibal when Will pushed closer and kissed him, tongue plunging deep between his lips in sultry parody of what might someday be.

His satisfaction turned to amusement when Will broke the kiss to breathe, “But not today.”

“Ah,” Hannibal sighed, wrapping his arms around Will’s lithe form to keep him close, pleased when Will settled onto him, “and just when we were both feeling so appreciative.”

He chuckled and Will laughed, both of them relaxing into the bed and each other.

Their contentment was interrupted by Jimmy, who let himself in as he always did—fully absorbed in his duties and without knocking.
“Good morning, my Lord! Cook wanted to know if you’d like a tray or formal breakfast, and I thought I’d warn you that Francis is already up skulking about if you’re—oh, dear,” Jimmy cut off, realizing there was more than one Lord Clarges in Will’s bed. He held his hands up in a staying gesture and said, “I’ll come back later.”

“No, Jimmy,” Hannibal said, sliding gracefully out of the bed since Will had vanished beneath the covers already to hide the state he was in. Not that he himself was in any less of a state, but he didn’t concern himself with it. “Take good care of him for me.”

“I always do, my Lord,” Jimmy said, round, wide eyes tracking him as Hannibal let himself through the washroom into his own suite. The moment the door closed behind him, Jimmy vigorously fanned himself and breathed, “Gods bless and have mercy on my soul, I was not prepared to see that.”

Will peeked out from under the covers and Jimmy caught him, his shock turning to a delighted, awed smile.

“You,” he said, wagging a finger Will’s direction, “should be one happy Omega, my Lord. Oh, heavens, I was not prepared! Shame on me!”

Will dissolved into laughter, half embarrassed but thoroughly amused. It was a lighthearted way to begin his morning, laughing and listening to Jimmy chatter as he got Will prepared for the day.

Jimmy—a professional no matter his informality—very tellingly said nothing about the marks on Will’s skin until he was dressing and it came time to put Will’s neckerchief on, prompting him to suggest, “How about we make this a bit looser for now?”

“Yes, Jimmy, I think that would be for the best,” Will agreed, wincing when he brushed his fingers over his long throat, where the marks were heaviest and most visible.

Jimmy put the piece of cloth down and fetched the arnica cream used for Will’s bruises.

“You know,” he said, smoothing the balm gently over the suck marks on Will’s neck, “I think this is the happiest I’ve ever seen you.”

Will smiled, a soft huff of laughter escaping him.

“I mean it,” Jimmy insisted, making sure it was rubbed in well before he began to loop Will’s neckerchief on. “I know you two had a rough beginning and things have been less than ideal to now, but if he can make you this happy, imagine how things could be from now on.”

Will flushed some, a light blush of color in his cheeks. “I fear that it’s simply the newness of the situation, Jimmy. Given time, I question my own confidence that things could remain this way between us.”

“You worry you’ll lose interest in one another?” Jimmy clarified, frowning when Will nodded. “Well, only time can tell, but if you don’t give it a chance, how can you ever say for certain, my Lord?”

Will said nothing, only cast his eyes down in thought, his own sentiments echoing what Jimmy had said. It would be easy to retreat, to go back to the familiar solitude that had defined his life as long as he could recall. There was a kind of cold comfort to be had in such, given that he could predict how it would feel. Sad, lonely, empty of anything but the frantic desire to be useful... but it was a state of being he was well acquainted with.

The other option was rife with uncertainty, with so many paths that would lead him over the cliff’s edge at last, dashing his heart against the rocks that lay below. There was no way to predict what would happen. There was no certainty. There was just the hope for happiness and the bitter terror it would be taken yet again, as even a hint of it always had been.

‘Had I any notion that such a power existed, I would thumb my nose at it. I would chase love to the ends of the earth, drown myself in happiness, and dare it to attempt to strip it from me...’

He recalled how his husband had looked as he said it, resting on the oars of the boat in the middle of Fernhill’s lake. He’d seemed so confident, so unafraid, so very certain he could wrest what he wanted from the careless jaws of Fate without fear of the consequences.

Some things, Will knew, were simply worth the cost of trying, no matter if one failed in the end.

“Now, which of these gorgeous watches would you like to wear today?” Jimmy asked, jolting Will from his thoughts.

He glanced up to find his valet peering into the box, a charmed smile on his lips.

“So many,” Jimmy sighed, running his fingers over them without touching. He looked back at Will and asked, “He sent you all of these?”
“He told me to choose some,” Will said, and reluctantly admitted, “or all of them.”

“All,” Jimmy said, nodding. “You should keep them all, my Lord. They are unique, and a gift should never be refused!”

“I don’t know, Jimmy, it seems obscene to keep them,” Will said, coming closer to look down into the box. They sparkled in the light, each one so beautiful there was no choosing between them.

“My Lord,” Jimmy said, his serious tone getting Will’s attention. “How many watches are here, do you think? Perhaps one for each birthday missed? One for each anniversary?”

Will frowned, studying the watches with more attention.

“Do you think, had he stayed from the start, you would have received only a watch for those times?” Jimmy pointed out, and lifted out one of the watches in question, a silver one whose face was inlaid with crystals and a blue gem that reflected the changing color of Will’s eyes back at him. “I think this one for today, don’t you?”

He thought of Hannibal kissing his hand each time he wanted to call Will beautiful, of him saying, ’You have already given me everything I need…”

“Yes, Jimmy,” Will said, turning to let his valet clip the watch to his watch chain. He didn’t feel the least bit hesitant or unhappy when he added, “And please pack them all with my things for our return to Marsham Heath.”

They took a late breakfast while their trunks were packed, though a portion of their wardrobes would remain at Chelsea House for the sake of convenience. Will’s new luggage was shown off by Jimmy, who had chosen it with care and preened with pride when Will complimented it.

“Francis,” Will said, drawing on his gloves in the foyer as Hannibal donned his coat and spoke in low tones with Mr. Black. “You will go ahead with Jimmy and Berger.”

“My Lord, I—”

Will’s mouth pursed in disapproval as he looked up at Francis from beneath his dark lashes, his brows drawing down. It brought the Alpha to silence, instantly contrite.

“I need not remind you that you are not in my good graces right now,” Will pointed out, “given how you vanished without a word and frightened the household on your return. You have not shown yourself in the best of lights, Mr. Dolarhyde.”

An expression of such shame and regret overtook Francis that Will paused, his Gift vividly reminding him that Francis was just as irreparably damaged as he was, and in that at least they had kinship.

“Francis,” he said, softening his tone. “I do appreciate your dedication as well as your kindness, and I will always be grateful for what you have done to protect me. I assure you, I am safe in my husband’s care. Please, go safely to Marsham Heath and avail yourself to Mr. Thatcher in whatever help he needs. We shall be along shortly.”

Francis ducked his head and nodded, whispering in that soft, diffident way of his, “Yes, my Lord.”

Will watched him go, somewhat ashamed by the relief he felt to have the big Alpha away from him.

“He took that surprisingly well,” Hannibal remarked, taking his walking cane from Mr. Black with a small smile of satisfaction.

“As well he should,” Will said, accepting his own hat from Mr. Black, both of them properly dressed to emerge outside into the beautiful day, though it always seemed a bit overcast once the factories were hard at work. “I will be glad when we can return him to my sister, though she seems to have little regard for him.”

“He has no reason to stay with her, if she abuses him,” Hannibal said, allowing Will to go outside ahead of him. “He has some experience in a noble house by now. He could find a position elsewhere.”

“She would never write him a reference,” Will said, finding the ducal coach waiting for them at the curb. “Especially if she is in the wrong. My sister despises being made to feel guilty about anything.”

“I will not offer my ungracious opinion on that, Will, but I would write Francis a reference myself if it would get rid of him,” Hannibal said, blunt in his dislike of the other Alpha, though Will was more inclined to see his side of it now.

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Will said, admiring the figure his husband cut with his smart hat and fashionable walking stick, his coat tailored to exquisite perfection to best show off his broad shoulders and athletic grace. “Shall we walk to the Row and have the coach meet us? I don’t fancy riding such a short distance and we’ll be in it soon enough.”
“An excellent plan,” Hannibal said, relaying such to the coachman. They moved towards the Row at an unhurried pace, arm in arm. “I do hope Francis will behave himself, now that he knows you won’t stand for it.”

“I was very firm with him,” Will said, watching the ducal coach rumble past on its way to the Row to wait for them. “It seems to be the only type of handling Alphas are willing to heed.”

“I happen to enjoy your softness, myself,” Hannibal said, in a thoroughly good humor after such a restful night’s sleep. No nightmares, no memories come to plague him, and every sense the gods had gifted him filled to the brim with his beautiful mate. He angled a look at Will and purred, “Although when you’re feeling appreciative, firmness is certainly—”

“Hannibal!”

Hannibal grinned, entirely unrepentant as he escorted Will towards the shops. “Ah, but there is so much to be done at Marsham. I doubt I can seduce you or even be threatened by your thighs, let alone by your garters, busy as you’ll be.”

His mate grinned, amused despite himself, though he rolled his blue eyes heavenward as if the gods could grant him more patience than he already had.

“I do find the Capital to be very diverting,” Will said, smiling when Hannibal held the door to the milliner’s open for him, yet he couldn’t fuss about it. Hannibal took such delight in doting on him it seemed churlish to refuse even the smallest of his gestures. “But I admit I am eager to return to Marsham Heath.”

“To the loving adoration of Miss Hobbs?” Hannibal teased, taking a short jab to his rib cage for his pertness. “You will have a fervent admirer for the remainder of our time in Moseley, I fear.”

“Only while we are in Moseley?” Will asked, leading the way inside. “Do you plan on escaping my hook, Lord Clarges?”

“Not if I can help it,” Hannibal promised, and happily followed in his wake.

It didn’t take Will a terribly long time to choose a hat suitable for Abigail, considering her tastes—like his own—were hindered by her upbringing. But it was beautiful, and the box it was put into was just as lovely and no doubt would make a gift all its own to a young girl who longed for something different than what she had always known.

Hannibal, who had amused himself by bantering with other shoppers, made his polite excuses and took Will’s arm to lead him out onto the walk, saying, “One of the ladies inside mentioned there is a street sale going on down at the East End.”

“A street sale? What’s that?” Will asked, allowing Hannibal to take the hatbox from him as they strolled towards the coach.

“Merchants set up temporary stalls,” Hannibal told him, returning nods and smiles as they were sent his way from passers-by. “They sell all sorts of things—jewelry, clothing, foods. I wouldn’t recommend any of it for a surety, but it can be quite exciting to see. Should you like to walk down that way? It’s a rather unsavory side of town, but we can have the coachman park nearby and go on from there if it’s too offensive.”

Will nodded, intrigued. “Yes, I would like to see it. I’m curious about the East End. Jimmy mentioned that there is a city within the city there. Have you been?”

“Not to that part, particularly,” Hannibal said, handing the package off to the footman, who stowed it inside on the seat. He murmured to him where to go and turned back to Will, an edge of discomfit to his voice when he said, “I found I avoided it. Too much of what was there reminded me of Lady Murasaki.”

Will searched his face, weighing his options, but only smiled in the end and said, “I understand. Shall we?”

It was a pleasant walk, though the state of the city around them seemed to degenerate as they moved further east. Will tried his best not to look too closely at the growing unpleasantness of those around him for fear his Gift would render him a slave to their plight. Even without his Gift it was difficult to pass by people in need, and Will resolved to devote more of his time to helping where he could, when he could. It seemed incomprehensible to him that the position of one’s birth should so profoundly affect their circumstances to such a vicious extent, and his remark to that end provoking a rather interesting conversation between them.

Their arrival to the street sale, however, gave them something more pleasant to focus on and the colorful, chaotic noise put a thrilled, shocked grin on Will’s face.

“What do you think?” Hannibal asked, finding Will’s excitement infectious, as always. “Should we go have a look?”

Will was delighted by that suggestion and they plunged right in.
It was chaos and stench and milling excitement, the clamor of hundreds all trying to be heard, bickering over prices and wares and hawking their items in impressive attempts to gain attention. Will took it all in with overwhelmed awe, unable to believe so many things could be in a single place on offer for purchase.

“You look like a fashionable fellow, my good sir! How about this fine silk scarf? It’s all the way from the Jade Islands, my dear customer! Priceless silk I just so happen—”

Will was unceremoniously tugged away by his husband but quickly forgot his ire as they walked through the throngs of people. They stopped to watch an impromptu magic show, investigate some frankly questionable jewelry, and listen to some fairly entertaining stories from a man who seemed convinced fairies were among them and causing illness. There were squawking chickens in crates, smoked meats, drinks doled out from the same tin ladle to each purchaser, snake oil medicines, gaudy jewels—nothing was sacred and everything was for sale, no matter what it was.

“I never dreamed anything like this could exist,” Will said, turning his easy smile on Hannibal, who was so close to his side no one dared push between them, even on the busy sidewalk. “It’s so easy to just vanish into the crowd, isn’t it? No titles, no genders, just people going about their business.”

“Is that something you would like, Will?” Hannibal asked, returning his soft smile. “To vanish into a crowd?”

“Yes, somewhat,” Will said, uttering a short, uncomfortable laugh. He paused at a cart selling bundles of feathers, some natural and others dyed. “It’s... interesting to be part of something, to feel normal.”

“You are part of something,” Hannibal said, settling his hand at the base of Will’s back, right where the sway of his spine dipped into the high curve of his backside. There was warmth and affection in his eyes and in his voice when he added, “You’re part of our family.”

Will’s eyes flew up to meet his, a smile on his lips.

“I said it before and I will say it again, as many times as it takes until you know it is true,” Hannibal said, leaning close to be heard over the din. “You belong with me, Will, and you will always be a Lecter, whatever you decide.”

Will averted his face, thoughts mulling. He reached out to touch the feathers as an excuse to move his attention, wishing Hannibal hadn’t such a knack for slicing through his defenses with the keen quickness of a scalpel to strengthen the attachment of his bond.

“These are beautiful,” he said, noticing several natural feathers in the bunches, their enhancements only Nature’s design. His voice was only a little tremulous, but Hannibal noticed it all the same, and rubbed his back to soothe him.

“Would you like them, Will?” he asked, gesturing to the elderly woman keeping the cart.

“Do you want me to scold you for it?” Will quipped, grasping for levity as a way to retreat from the frightening comfort his husband offered.

“Only if I can seduce you after,” Hannibal shot back, amused and relieved that Will was not upset. “Truly, though, would you like them? Perhaps for your lures?”

Will’s humor turned to surprise and he asked, “How do you know about my lures?”

“Hawkes mentioned you had a hobby,” Hannibal said, wondering if Mr. Hawkes had framed the lures and placed them as he’d asked. He certainly hoped so. He could just imagine the coshing that awaited him when Will saw his hard work out for everyone to admire.

“And you are nothing if not curious,” Will finished for him. “It must seem a trivial pastime.”

“I find it intriguing, as a matter of fact,” Hannibal said. “It takes skill to make something utilitarian as well as beautiful.”

Will wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. He settled for nodding, and said, “Then, yes, thank you. I would like them for my lures.”

“Perhaps you can teach me how to make them someday?” Hannibal asked, hoping Will would say yes.

“It would bore you.”

“That could never happen, Will,” Hannibal said, diverting his attention to the proprietress making a bundle of the undyed feathers, only dimly aware of a squabble happening behind them.

It drew Will’s attention, however—the sudden clamor of neighing horses, shouting people, and the unmistakable cry of an animal in pain.
Startled and frightened, Will looked closer in time to see a dog dart from beneath trampling feet, trailing the broken end of a rope.

“Good gods! What on earth—”

The dog bumped into a woman and bounded into the crossing street, causing a pair of carriage horses to shy and thrash, nearly braining it.

“Gods!” Will gasped again, instinctively going after it, frightened the poor animal had been hurt.

“Will!” Hannibal called, unable to do more than watch him thread his way across the busy street, stuck as he was for the moment. Growling with worry, he fished out some coins for the vendor, snatched the little bundle from her hand, and followed after his mate with apprehension hastening his stride.

The dog ran at full speed down alleys and through narrow streets with Will in close pursuit. He had no thought to being alone in a strange part of the city, no thought to how he would find his way back. He wasn’t even sure why he persisted, except that it might have been hurt somehow and might need help, though the speed with which it fled said otherwise.

He took no heed of his surroundings or the dangerous looks he was given as a finely-dressed gentleman where he clearly didn’t belong. He bounded under laundry lines, over people in the alley, past screaming babies and their startled mothers, oblivious to anything other than the dog.

He most certainly did not notice another man chasing after him with a greater lead than Hannibal and as much determination.

The dog ran to ground in a narrow, empty alleyway, shooting in between a pile of crates to cower against the wall, well and truly terrified of the commotion it had caused as well as the man pursuing it.

Will came to a scrambling stop, panting with effort, and dropped into a crouch to peer into the darkness. The faintest gleam of amber eyes flashed, accompanied by an uncertain whine.

“There you are,” Will breathed, wishing he had something to entice it out. The trailing end of a rope lay next to his boot and he was careful not to touch it, unsure of how it was fastened to the dog’s neck. “Did that frighten you, hm? Let’s have a look at you and see if you’re hu—”

A hand on his shoulder made him spin around, surging to his feet to find a grinning, anxious blond man before him. He heard Hannibal shouting for him, racing through the maze of alleyways after losing sight of him, the Alpha roar in his voice emerging with his panic.

“Did that frighten you?” the man asked, sending his words back at him with a mocking smile. “Let’s have a look at you.”

“Who are you? What do you want?” Will asked, concerned by his manic smile but unwilling to show it. His heel hit the crates as he moved and shifted them, a few loose pieces falling against the wall behind him.

“You’re Lord Clarges, aren’t you?” the man asked, adjusting his wire-frame spectacles, his hand skating up through his hair so that it stood on end, which in no way helped his agitated appearance.

“May I know who is asking?” Will retorted, wary. “Or are we to play a guessing game?”

“Could you come with me, please?” he asked instead, and a shift of his hand showed Will the flash of a pistol in his jacket pocket.

Will’s brows slammed together with annoyance and he said, “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

The young man laughed, a breathless and unsettling sound, and said, “No, see, you are going to come with me, or I’m going to just shoot your husband. I can hear him. Can’t you? Any minute now he’ll be here.”

“You’d better do a good job of it,” Will advised, bristling to be so threatened. “If you only manage to hurt him, he’ll take you apart like a rag doll.”

Hannibal’s voice grew louder, drawing him ever closer on the trail of Will’s faint scent.

“But if you do make a good job of it,” Will warned, his voice falling to a dangerous growl, “then I will be the one taking you apart. I promise.”

The man flushed with consternation and uttered a sharp little yip of laughter, more an escape of nervous energy than anything. “Come with me.”
“I will not,” Will said, placid in the face of potential harm, knowing there was no danger this unstable person might offer that could weigh against the scale of his father’s violence.

When the man made as if to grab his arm, Will didn’t think twice. He calmly plucked up the plank next to him and swung it with every ounce of his not inconsiderable strength, smashing it upside the young man’s head.

He fell backwards with a howl, his hand on his bleeding face, nearly thrown off his feet by the force of Will’s swing. His broken spectacles crunched underfoot as he stumbled, reeling.

“And let that be a lesson to you!” Will warned him, moving closer and brandishing the broken board just to hammer home his point. “What vile and shameful behavior, sir! How dare you threaten my husband or me!”

The man somehow kept his balance and turned to lunge towards Will, who was fully prepared to hit him again.

Much to their mutual surprise, the dog appeared between them, snarling its little heart out, every hair on its brindled body standing stiff in agitation.

Glaring, the man staggered back and fumbled his way into the nearest passage between buildings, nearly falling over his own feet in his haste to escape the barking dog, the threatening Omega, and the furious Alpha who was hurtling towards him shouting, “Mason! Damn you!”

“Mason?” Will echoed, shocked. He turned to give chase but stopped in his tracks when Hannibal shouted, “No! Will! Stop, for the love of all the gods!”

His better sense took heed of the sheer horrified terror in Hannibal’s voice and he stopped in his tracks, waiting for his furious husband to reach him, the dog barking madly down the alleyway after Mason’s fleeing form.

Hannibal arrived in a flurry, scooping Will up into his arms with such force he lifted him clear up off of his feet, gasping with harsh relief, “Gods! Are you hurt? Did he hurt you?!”

“I’m fine, Hannibal,” Will said, dropping the plank to hug him back, the adrenaline from the moment fading to leave him shaken. “I’m fine, see?”

Hannibal eased him down to his feet, hands flying over Will’s body to ensure that he was whole, every muscle in his body singing with tension.

“Gods,” he said, over and over, tears standing in his amber eyes, “gods, you’ve terrified me, Will. I was sure he would hurt you. Gods, if I had lost you—”

“Hannibal,” Will said, stroking his cheek to calm him, though the terror in his bond was difficult to conquer. “I’m fine, I promise.”

Hannibal calmed under his touch, shuddering hard and holding Will as if he might suddenly vanish, his fear giving way to pure, unadulterated fury.

“He must have been following us,” Will said, his hands falling to Hannibal’s shoulders, still soothing the tension from him. “He wanted me to come with him. I’m not sure of the reason why.”

“Mason Verger is impulsive and violent. Those are the only reasons he needs,” Hannibal said, his arms tightening reflexively in response to the threat Mason posed. He searched Will’s face again, anxious and worried. “You are certain he did not hurt you?”

“He never got a chance,” Will said, and honestly so. “I nearly brained him with a board.”

Hannibal stared at him, speechless in his incredulity.

“He threatened to shoot you!” Will said in his own defense, and the moment he did so he wished he hadn’t mentioned it. Panic filled Hannibal’s eyes, accompanied by him snarling, “He had a weapon on you?”

“Not for long,” Will assured him. “It was in his pocket. He didn’t have time to draw it before I knocked him one.”

Hannibal’s pulse ticked in his throat, the despairing upset in his eyes not ebbing in the least.

“I couldn’t allow him to agitate me,” Will said, hoping to curtail his censure, “as you have reserved that right for yourself.”

It took Hannibal a long, considering silence to admit to himself that Will had taken the only course of action available to him, given what he’d run headlong into, and shouting about it now that the danger had passed wasn’t likely to do more than earn him his little mate’s keen ire.
“You broke a plank across his face?” he managed at last, letting the issue of the pistol go for now, though his whole soul shuddered with trepidation when he thought of it. A small, lopsided smile curved his fine lips and he said a bit breathlessly, “What else would I expect of my mate? You truly are dangerous, Will. Well done.”

He kissed Will’s forehead, then his mouth, hugging him close while saying again, “Well done.”

“I didn’t do it alone,” Will said, blushing at even such a small kiss out in public, though no one was anywhere around. He gestured at the dog, who stood watching them with wary hope, the ragged flag of his curled tail beginning to wag when Will looked down at him. “I had a little help.”

Hannibal, too, looked down at the dog, his nose wrinkling at the state it was in, but he said all the same, “There’s a good dog.”

The dog whined, a soft and pleading noise accompanying more energetic wagging from its bushy tail.

“Well, he’s a brave little fellow,” Hannibal said, still keeping a watchful eye in the direction Mason had gone, though they both knew well enough he would not try his luck a second time for now. He dropped another kiss on Will’s forehead and said, “As are you, though I could paddle your backside for running off like that, Will. Honestly!”

“I know,” Will admitted, claiming his share of blame for what had just happened. “It was impulsive to take after him. I was worried he’d been hurt by the horses.”

“He seems hale enough to me,” Hannibal said, too relieved to have his mate back unharmed to hold his impulsive actions against him. “But he will need a wash.”

Will shot a startled look at him, asking with surprise, “A wash?”

“Yes, preferably as soon as possible,” Hannibal said, bending to take hold of the rope that dangled from the dog’s neck. “Though it will have to wait until we leave the city. We need to go, and quickly. I expect your little chap will enjoy himself where we’re headed much more so than the Capital.”

Will looked from him and back to the dog, then back to Hannibal. Before he could formulate a response, Hannibal said, “We need to get back to the coach this minute and be on our way. I’ll send one of the footmen to Mr. Buddish immediately and get someone on Mason’s trail. Mr. Tier should be here any time and there is no better hunter.”

He tugged Will back the way they’d come, the dog heeding the lead without resistance despite the packed streets.

The coach was waiting at the edge of the street sale, the footmen on anxious alert. Hannibal dispatched one of them to Mr. Buddish with news of Mason’s attack, and the other helped Will into the coach, hesitating over the dog until Hannibal pointedly looked at him and said, “Yes, get on with it.”

The dog was summarily hefted into the coach, where he curled up in the corner, alert but still wagging his tail. Will leaned down over him to check the rope around his neck, relieved to find it was not a slipknot and hadn’t bitten into his skin. It would do for now to keep him from fleeing until a proper collar could be acquired.

“That’s a good boy,” Will praised, pushing over when Hannibal climbed in next to him. The coachman whistled and the horses began to pull, the coach swaying into motion to carry them back to Marsham Heath.

“Well, we’ve done all we can do for now,” Hannibal said, settling against Will with a sigh and taking his hand to clasp it tight. He kissed his knuckles and rested their joined hands on his thigh before saying, “Mr. Buddish will engage the constabulary and notify Grandfather, and Mr. Tier will be put directly onto the hunt, which should please him.”

“Then all’s well that ends well,” Will said, rubbing his thumb over Hannibal’s hand.

“Yes, well, I still owe you a paddling for running so heedlessly into such danger,” Hannibal said, turning his head a little to smile at him, “but at least you rooted Mason out and gave him a smack for his trouble. This way, at least, we know for a certainty he is in the Capital.”

“What of the Misses?”

“Safe where they are,” Hannibal said, stretching his legs out to get comfortable. “Mr. Buddish will convey the findings through a third party to them as well as to the garrison. They will not be taken unawares.”

Will relaxed, letting the jostling of the coach wedge him close to his husband.

The dog gazed up at him, his amber eyes the same light hue as Hannibal’s, amusingly enough.

“And what are you smirking at?” Hannibal inquired, noting it.

“I can’t believe you want to keep the dog,” Will said, his smile turning to a grin.
“Considering you risked your life chasing after it, I hardly have a choice,” Hannibal teased. “What on earth will you call him? Something gallant, I hope. He has managed to help rescue you, after all.”

“I think...” Will said, both of them turning their gazes to the dog in question. “We should call him Winston.”

“Winston,” Hannibal said, and nodded. “A fine name, indeed.”

Winston’s ears perked up in response and he yipped just once as if in happy agreement with his masters’ choice.

The return trip to Marsham Heath passed in the blink of an eye and without incident until midway through Moseley when the dog began to fidget and whine with increasing urgency.

“I believe Winston needs a moment,” Will said, and Hannibal thumped on the roof, anxious that their furry little hero not mess inside the coach.

The coach came to a gradual halt when it could, resting at the curb near Moseley Park. The footman had the door open before either of them could stir for it and they emerged onto the sidewalk where Will kept Winston firmly in hand with the length of rope.

“He is a rather handsome fellow,” Hannibal said, lifting his chin to taste the clean air, a refreshing change from the smoke and stench of the city. “Though he needs a proper collar and lead.”

“I’ll see what’s at Marsham,” Will said, laughing softly as Winston sniffled, and promptly lifted a leg against the coach wheel, much to Hannibal’s consternation. “I’m sure one of your esteemed Lecter ancestors was a dog person—”

“Lord Clarges!”

The booming voice actually made Will jump somewhat, sudden and loud as it was. Winston flattened to the ground, tail tucked, and scooted behind Will’s legs even as Will stepped closer to Hannibal’s side.

Hannibal shifted as he did, slipping an arm around Will’s waist and drawing him into the warmth of his side, all of it accomplished in less than a split second, instinct and necessity responding to Will’s spike of shock.

Will saw the source coming towards them, accompanied by a woman and three uniformed officers. He was a mountain of a man with his elegant lady on his arm, both of them smiling their way. She slapped his broad shoulder with reproach and said, “Honestly, Jack. Excuse him, Lords Clarges. The cannon fire has made him somewhat deaf.”

“I can hear well enough when you scold me, Bella,” he said, drawing to a halt just a pace away. “It is good to see you’ve returned, my Lords!”

“Magistrate Crawford, Mrs. Crawford,” Hannibal said, inclining his head to them both and relaxing, his ease translating to Will. “This is my spouse, Will. The other Lord Clarges, if you will.”

Bella’s smiled widened at that and she looked Will over with kind, thoughtful dark eyes.

“We were on our way back up to Marsham,” Will said, still unused to people looking at him with such attention, particularly beautiful women. “It is so agreeable after the chaos of the Capital.”

“Yes, yes, it is,” Jack remarked, nodding. He looked around at the city he was Mayor of, pride evident in his face. “And how do you find our little town of Moseley, Lord Clarges? Much changed, I imagine?”

“Considering I haven’t been here since I was a boy, very much so,” Hannibal said, smiling, “but only in the most pleasant of ways.”

“You come for tea sometime without your husband,” Jack said, leaning close to Will to whisper with a smile, “The stories I could tell.”

Will blinked, unconsciously pressing closer to Hannibal’s side. Jack Crawford wore the strength of his charisma as armor, a mantle of force to be used like a battering ram. He was tall and broad and carried his bulk with confident dignity, a country general used to being in charge and expecting to be obeyed, garnering the great respect of those who knew him—it pushed against Will with the pressure and strength of an ocean wave, affecting him all the more thanks to Mason’s attack.

“Jack,” Bella said, chuckling. “You’re doing it again.”

“What?” Jack asked, straightening with a pleased, smug smile. “Bella tells me I can be overbearing.”

“An honest spouse is a gift from the gods,” Will said, and Jack laughed, belly-deep and hearty. Will smiled when Jack shook a finger his way and said, “Yes, indeed! I can say I have quite a gift, in all respects.”
He turned to Hannibal then, who was grinning, and said, “Please say you’ll join us for dinner one evening?”

“At your invitation,” Hannibal said. “And thank you for your assistance in keeping Will safe.”

“You needn’t thank him, Lord Clarges,” Bella said, and leveled a wry smirk at her husband. “He thrives on such things.

Only, lately perhaps there is a little too much excitement around here for my comfort.”

“On the matter of uncomfortable things,” Hannibal said, recalling another issue he was not pleased to leave as it stood. “Have you any information on a man named Hobbs?”

“Garret Jacob Hobbs?” Bella asked, supplying the name with a soft frown. “He’s a bit of an odd man.”

“I ran into him in the woods,” Will said, leaning down to give Winston a reassuring rub behind his ears. “He was very angry and unstable. It was unsettling to see.”

“He and his wife live at the edge of town on the east lane. He’s known to have somewhat bizarre reactions to Omegas, Lord Clarges,” Jack said. “I hope he didn’t upset you. Usually, we never hear a peep out of him. They’re very quiet folk, the Hobbs family, always have been. Their daughter works up at Marsham, doesn’t she, Bella?”

“Yes, surprisingly enough,” Bella said, her full mouth curving in a small smile. “They’re so protective of her, I don’t think anyone in Moseley even knew they had a child at first. No one had ever seen the poor girl until she started at the schoolhouse. I was shocked to hear he allowed her to work.”

“She must have charmed him,” Jack said, chuckling when Bella agreed, “She’s a darling girl, lovely and pleasant.”

“She is a delightful child,” Will said. “I would never have guessed there was a relation, given the difference in their temperaments. But I suppose Mr. Hobbs was merely having difficulties. He said he was hunting; perhaps he lost his prey.”

“I think the most reasonable course of action is to avoid him,” Hannibal said, still bothered by it. “I dislike the idea of him lurking about the house.”

“Mr. Wells could always engage a gamekeeper, but I doubt it would do much good,” Jack said, troubled. “Hobbs is gone on another of his hunting trips, but when he returns I’ll have one of my men inform him to stay out of the woods near Marsham. Everyone else has better sense than to go so near His Grace’s private property.”

“No, please don’t trouble yourselves on that count,” Will said, straightening. “Thank you for your assistance, Magistrate Crawford.”

“It’s no trouble at all, that’s what I’m here for,” Jack said, smiling with expansive good will that demanded an answering smile. “Oh, and Lord Clarges, if I could have a moment of your time?”

“I believe that is my cue to continue my walk,” Bella said, directing a wry, fond smile at her husband. She reached out and lay her gloved hand on Will’s arm in a brief, gentle gesture and said, “We will send an invitation very soon, Lord Clarges. It has been lovely meeting you both.”

“The pleasure is all ours,” Hannibal said, and when she moved her hand, he swept it up to kiss it.

Bella moved off across the street with one of the guards in tow. It seemed strange to Will that they would have men escorting them, even if Jack was the Magistrate.

“You can take the coach up, Will,” Hannibal offered, and his gaze dropped to Winston, who looked woefully repentant for relieving himself on the coach wheel. “If Winston is quite finished?”

“I think I should like to walk instead,” Will said, stretching tall, his spine popping in sympathy. “It’s a lovely day and the air is so fresh here. Winston needs some exercise and I want to drop our gift by for Abigail.”

Hannibal frowned softly as Will fished the hatbox out of the coach. He cast a worried glance up towards Marsham Heath where Francis, presumably, had already arrived.

“After everything that’s happened, I don’t want you going anywhere alone,” Hannibal said.

“One of my men can escort him,” Jack offered, reading Hannibal’s unease and sharing it. He took the parcel from Will and handed it to the young officer next to him, saying, “Drop it and I’ll drop you.”

“Does that suit you, Will?” Hannibal asked, and when Will agreed, he said despite his concern, “Then I will see you back at Marsham.”

“Yes,” Will said. “I’ll just drop this by to Miss Hobbs on my way and be up—no, don’t scowl, Hannibal. I’ll only take a moment and Magistrate Crawford said Mr. Hobbs is off hunting. I expect he will be better behaved in the future, should we meet again.”
“I do have very faith in your ability to handle yourself, Will, only please exercise caution,” Hannibal asked, taking his free hand to kiss it. “I should hate for Magistrate Crawford to arrest you for trouncing Mr. Hobbs in his own home.”

Jack’s brows rose in surprise and Will told him, “My husband is prone to exaggeration, Magistrate Crawford, have no fear for Mr. Hobbs. It was very good to meet you. Thank you again for your efforts on our behalf.”

Jack tipped his head in acknowledgment, his easy smile doing little to hide the tension that began to bubble through him. Will stepped away from them, his curiosity burning. He remembered Mrs. Crawford’s comment about things being too exciting recently and couldn’t help but wonder if this issue was related.

“How has something dire happened?” Will asked the guardsman as they headed towards the outskirts of town near Marsham, Winston testing the boundaries of his lead. The ducal coach rolled past on its way to Marsham, empty now of both her Lords, the footman giving a cheeky salute to Will as he passed.

The young officer accompanying him grew even more nervous, but only offered, “It’s best to let his Lordship say, my Lord.”

“That’s ridiculously inconvenient,” Will informed him, then sighed in resignation. “But I can hardly blame you for your caution. Would you happen to know which of these houses belongs to the Hobbs family?”

“Yes, m’Lord, I’ll take you.”

The Hobbs cottage sat apart from the lane in a small cluster of similar cottages, all neatly tended and handsome on their respective plots. Will recognized it on sight simply due to what set behind the cottage—frames for skinning and an unusually large smokehouse that nearly rivaled the home for size. It billowed fragrant smoke into the air, but it had the taint of the same unwholesome scent that had made Will’s stomach churn. Surprisingly, Winston whined and grew reluctant as they approached, as if that nauseating smell made him nervous.

“Wait here, please,” Will said, taking the package and indicating a place next to the door. “Would you mind holding him for me?”

The officer took Winston’s rope with a smile and crouched to pet him, happily diverted.

Will knocked, the noise softened by the fine leather of his gloves on the worn wood, but within a very short time, a rather slender woman with her hair in a straggling blonde bun answered the door, confusion and alarm filling her blue eyes when she beheld Will and a guardsman on her doorstep.

“Mrs. Hobbs? Forgive me for intruding on you without warning, I’m—”

“Lord Clarges,” she said, a nervous smile curving her mouth. She smoothed at her hair and then her skirts, her eyes darting to see if anyone else accompanied him. “Abigail has spoken of you. Please, come in.”

“Thank you,” Will said, stepping inside. The scent of pine and leather within had a tang of Mr. Hobbs’ unwholesome scent. It permeated everything, cloying and inescapable. Will felt for a brief, frightening moment as if it was seeping into his skin, reaching for the blood in his veins to become part of him—a dark and foggy shadow coiling out from unlit corners. The sensation was so disturbing Will brushed at his arm to repel it, prompting Mrs. Hobbs to say, “Have you a chill, my Lord? I will build the fire up.”

“No, please don’t trouble yourself,” Will said, following her into her kitchen, which overflowed with drying herbs and flowers. The rich scent of yeast and baking bread chased the remnants of Hobbs’ odor away and calmed his unease. “I only wished to bring this gift in person and spare your daughter the effort of carrying it down from Marsham.”

“You’re very kind,” Mrs. Hobbs said, snatching up a cloth to dust a chair off before offering it to him. “Beg your pardon, it’s bread day. Does the scent bother you?”

“No, not at all,” he said, surprised that she would mention it. It occurred to him Mrs. Hobbs was a beta woman, used to the scent sensitivities of an Alpha mate. Hoping to allay her worry, he said, “I enjoy the scent of baking bread, Mrs. Hobbs. It reminds me of when I was a child. Our family cook was very kind to me.”

“Please, call me Louise,” she insisted, hastening to remove the ever-present kettle from the fire. Will settled the package on the table and waited in polite silence while she made tea for them both.

“I do apologize, Lord Clarges,” Louise Hobbs said, offering Will a nervous smile along with his cup of tea. “I’m sure this isn’t the type of house you’re used to.”

“You have a lovely home, Mrs. Hobbs,” Will said, taking the tea with a grateful smile. “And please, call me Will.”
“I couldn’t do that,” she said, flushing brightly. Her hands fisted in her apron but she sat down at the small table in her sunny kitchen. It was a rough place but very homely, comfortable and loved. “How do you find our little town, my Lord?”

“Beautiful and a welcome change from the Capital,” Will said, sipping his tea. He noticed Mrs. Hobbs was fiddling with her cup, more nervous now than she had been upon his arrival. “Mrs. Hobbs—Louise—you seem very unsettled. If I have caught you at a bad time—”

“No, please never think it,” Louise said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “It is only... Abigail has spoken so highly of you. I wondered if you might be curious about her, and that is why you’ve come.”

It was, Will thought, a very odd way of stating it.

“I have an interest in everyone associated with the Lecter family, Mrs. Hobbs. Would you mind telling me about her?” Will asked, turning the cup in his fingers, hoping to put her at ease. “How old is Abigail?”

“She’s sixteen, nearly seventeen,” Louise said, her face softening in a smile as she thought of her daughter. “Stubborn and sweet and the apple of her father’s eye.”

Something lurked there. Will could feel it in the way she turned her head away, the way her smile faded at the edges, worn with untold grief.

“Mrs. Hobbs,” he softly said, his nagging certainty that something was amiss solidifying with every moment she would not look at him. “Has something happened? Between Abigail and her father?”

She shook her head a little and laughed, an embarrassed, soft sound. “No, it... It’s just that she’s growing up, and unfortunately you can’t shield children from gossip when they reach a certain age.”

“Mrs. Hobbs?” Will asked, reaching out to grasp her hand, a spontaneous gesture made to soothe the growing agitation he could feel from her. “What is it? What’s happened?”

She seemed bewildered by his question, and even said, “I-I assumed you knew, my Lord. I thought... well, that’s why you’ve come?”

“I have come only to deliver a gift for a dedicated employee,” Will assured her. “I most certainly did not come to distress you.”

She seemed reluctant to believe him, or else in possession of facts he himself lacked. All the same, she dabbed at her eyes with her apron and squeezed his hand in return.

“I suppose you’ll know before long,” she said. “Abigail wants to find her real parents.”

Will processed that, understanding at once why she was so upset. Raising a child who was her own in all but the carrying, now facing the loss of her to a mother who had never dried a tear, never shared laughter, never witness first steps or heard first words.

Mother, a title that could be stripped in an instant by an utter stranger based on nothing more than a child’s curiosity about where she came from.

“Mrs. Hobbs, I am so sorry, you must be so frightened,” Will said, feeling her tremble and holding her tighter for it, as if he could will his strength into her.

She nodded, grappling for words for a moment, trying for a smile that was tremulous at best. “Garret and I could never have children of our own. It was such a difficult realization for him. He’s an Alpha, you know; it’s such a tricky business. We make a rather strange couple, I suppose.”

“Not at all,” Will said, pondering. “There are a great many Alphas who marry betas, Mrs. Hobbs.”

“I wasn’t his first choice, I’ll admit,” she said, aiming for proud and winding up somewhere tinged in bitterness. “But no Omega would bond with an Alpha who can’t give them children. I never cared about that. All I wanted was him... and then came Abigail, and we were the happiest we’d ever been.”

“A family at last,” Will murmured. “Until Abigail realized how different from you both she was? Until old gossip fell on fresh ears?”

“Yes,” Louise said. “She’s very smart, such a smart girl. She started asking questions. What was I to do? I couldn’t lie to my only daughter... She just wants to see where she came from. It’s only natural, isn’t it?”

“When did she first ask about her birth mother?”
“Summer, I think?” Louise said, shrugging, concentration wrinkling her brow. “Early summer. She's been plotting ever since to find a way back to where she came from. One of these days she’ll leave us.”

“But you’re her mother,” Will said, squeezing her hand again. “No one can ever take your place, Mrs. Hobbs. Abigail will always be your daughter and you will always be her mother.”

“T-thank you, my Lord,” she said, her smile less forced. “I certainly hope that’s the case. Garret’s been beside himself. She’s his pride and joy, you know. She’s the son he always wanted and the daughter he treasures. He would be so lost without her.”

Will nodded, and patted her hand once more before drawing back. He wasn’t sure what it had gotten from her, whether it was important somehow or not, but it felt important. It felt like something that could make all the difference.

“Is Abigail working today?” Will asked. “I had hoped to speak with her, very briefly of course.”

“Abigail is helping her father. They’ve been out hunting,” Mrs. Hobbs said. “They should be returning soon. Would you like me to send word when they come home?”

“No, that isn’t necessary, but thank you,” Will said, grateful for her offer. “Just tell her that I hope she enjoys our gift with a glad heart.”

“I certainly will. You’re so generous, my Lord, to remember our girl,” Louise said, her anxiety rising again. “Can I get you anything else? A tart, perhaps, or some toast?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Hobbs,” Will said, smiling to allay her nerves. “I think I’ve taken more than enough of your time. Forgive me for being so intrusive. I do not envy your situation, but I truly do hope things work out for the best with your family.”

Will certainly never dreamed that his kind words might come back to haunt him so swiftly and with such ill intent.

“I realize this isn’t really the best time, but I wanted to tell you before you heard—one of the village girls has gone missing,” Jack said, walking with Hannibal back towards Marsham at a slow pace.

“Missing? Has she fled to Blackwall? The soldiers can be very tempting for a young girl with excitement on her mind,” Hannibal said, mild alarm taking hold of him when he looked at Jack and saw the deep, profound concern written in his features. “Is there something you’re not telling me, Jack?”

“We’ve had girls going missing every so often for almost a year, now,” Jack admitted, and held up a staying hand when Hannibal began to protest. “I know, I should have written to His Grace, but I didn’t wish to distress him. We are all well aware of how fragile his health is.”

“If not Grandfather, then surely you could have applied to me,” Hannibal said, scowling. “Children are missing, Jack. This is no trifling thing!”

“You needn’t tell me that, Lord Clarges,” Jack said, the weight of his worries bowing the set of his shoulders. “There have been seven so far.”

“Seven?” Hannibal echoed, incredulous. “Jack!”

“We thought at first it was merely a case of running away,” Jack said, lacing his hands behind his back. “Fancying a soldier and taking off for Blackwall, as you said. But there were too many similarities for it to be just that.”

“They resembled one another?” Hannibal questioned, wishing that Will had come with him, bending his keen mind to the details that would surely lose their meaning in a retelling.

“All of them had brown or auburn hair and blue eyes. All were of similar height, around sixteen or seventeen years old,” Jack said, shaking his head. “Good girls from good, hard-working families.”

“Girls in the bloom of their youth,” Hannibal said, shaking his head. “A terrible shame. Have you found nothing of them?”

“No trace,” Jack said. “For a time we all hoped that they might yet return... but the longer things wear on, the less probable that becomes.”

“How long ago did the last girl vanish?” Hannibal asked.

“The day after you arrived,” Jack answered. “She went to fetch an order for her mother and never returned. No one recalls seeing her anywhere along the way. It’s as if she simply vanished into thin air. They all seemed to have vanished into thin air.”
Hannibal cast a glance ahead, but he was unable to see Will from this distance and caught no sight of him on the trail up to Marsham.

“I will write to Grandfather of this issue,” Hannibal decided. “And I will apply to the Capital for assistance.”

“I would prefer to handle this ourselves,” Jack said, his frown ferocious. “But with this many children missing, we’ll accept any help we can get.”

They hit the main thoroughfare, where there was foot traffic enough that Jack was forced to make polite introductions, though word had spread that the Lords Clarges were installed at Marsham for a time.

“News travels quickly,” Hannibal lamented, tipping a nod in answer to another greeting.

“Old blood is big news, Lord Clarges, always has been,” Jack said. “Hopefully your troubles won’t catch wind of your location.”

“I’m afraid that’s a moot point, as we never hoped to be circumspect in our movements,” Hannibal said. “But I am keeping him close and we are attempting to remain unpredictable.”

“Who wouldn’t in your place, hm?” Jack asked, a twinkle in his dark brown eyes and one brow quirking.

“Have you a report for me regarding Mr. Dolarhyde?” Hannibal asked.

“No, Lord Clarges, I have not,” Jack said, grim. “Because I was informed this morning that two bodies fished out of the river yesterday were those of the men I tasked with following him.”

Hannibal’s gaze snapped up to his, ugly distress settling in the pit of his stomach.

“Their throats were slashed, ear to ear,” Jack said, miming it under his jaw. “The Detective labeled it a robbery.”

“Is that what you believe?” Hannibal asked, somber and serious and even more determined that Francis not be allowed access to Will.

“I believe that your Mr. Dolarhyde is a dangerous man,” Jack said, grim, “and that I won’t risk any more of my men where he is concerned. A certain amount of danger is expected considering our profession, but I won’t send them straight into certain death.”

“Nor should you,” Hannibal said. “I’ll see that the funeral costs are covered.”

“The families will appreciate that, Lord Clarges,” Jack said, the weight of his responsibilities resting on the slope of his broad shoulders. “Have a care with him. If he is the one who dispatched my men, then he is certainly no one to underestimate.”

“No,” Hannibal said, disturbed and unhappy. “He certainly is not.”

Chapter 31

Hannibal remained disturbed and unhappy on his walk back up to Marsham Heath, his mind occupied with the issue of Francis and the knowledge that so many children had gone missing. He had never imagined he would be bringing Will from one desperate situation to another and was momentarily flummoxed on how best to proceed. Will would refuse to leave now that renovations were underway, at least at first, and it clearly was not safe in the Capital with Mason at large. Galley Field was an option but not one he wished to impose on Will so soon, and the other holdings in their hands were much farther away.

He was so occupied in his thoughts that the wet nose rubbing against his hand came as a surprise, as did Will asking, “Hannibal? Is everything alright?”

“No, it isn’t, actually,” Hannibal readily admitted, pausing on the path as Will reached him. He and Winston approached from a side lane where a little group of cottages sat in the distance, picturesque but isolated. Hannibal admired him for a moment, enjoying having his beautiful mate so near and finding the sight of Will calmed him, even if the strange scent from the smokehouse in the distance made his nose sting. “Forgive me, I didn’t hear you come.”

“You were concentrating very hard,” Will remarked, frowning as he saw the worry on his husband’s face. “I sent the guard packing when I caught sight of you, before you ask. I am safe enough within shouting distance of such a ferocious beast.”

His blue eyes flicked to Hannibal’s face when he added, “And I had Winston with me, as well.”

Hannibal chuckled and rested his arm behind Will’s back with a happy sigh, his heart thundering when Will leaned into him. They resumed their journey home in comfortable, close contact, Winston busying about in the bushes along the way.
“I have had some unsettling news, Will,” Hannibal said, deciding to relate the more pressing matter. He could do nothing personally for those children except apply to the Capital for help, but Francis was a problem they could sort together, even if there was just as big a chance of Will rising to the Alpha’s defense as there was of his being equally worried. “It seems the two men Magistrate Crawford dispatched to follow Francis at my request have turned up dead.”

Will’s mouth bowed down in troubled contemplation and he leaned just a bit closer, seeking the comfort of Hannibal’s touch. “How were they found?”

“Washed up in the river,” Hannibal said. “Their throats had been cut.”

Will said nothing, their silence broken only by Winston’s happy investigation and occasional gruff barks.

“You think Francis killed them, don’t you?” Will finally asked.

Hannibal considered the question, but merely asked, “Don’t you?”

Will sighed, weighty and unhappy but resigned. He nodded, admitting, “I think there is a good chance he might have, Hannibal, if he was doing something we would not approve of and realized people were following him. I have no desire to condemn a man without evidence, nor hold his history of violence against him, but something in me fears to disregard the warnings as they come and there is little room to find coincidence in their deaths.”

“If Francis is capable of brutally killing two men, then I cannot decide what worries me more—your sister’s safety if we return him to her,” Hannibal said, drawing Will around the side of Marsham Heath onto the garden path, “or what on earth she had him doing that he felt he must kill to keep her secret.”

“You’re assuming he didn’t lie about being on her orders,” Will said, his voice subdued and low. The canopy of trees overtook them as they moved around the house and through the small but lovingly-tended garden. It was peaceful there with the bees humming around the vibrant flower beds, the birds and squirrels about their busy business in the treeline. It was a relief to breathe the fresh air and feel the quiet of the country after the bustle of the city, but Will found he could not enjoy it as he wanted, not with so many things weighing on his mind. “It’s a sobering situation and I believe it is one which I must leave in Mina’s hands. I will write a letter to her, detailing what has happened, and I will send Francis to deliver it. If she feels threatened or uneasy, the staff of Hartford can fetch the constable and have him removed. If she is happy to keep him... I will worry when the answer comes, I suppose.”

“That seems the best course,” Hannibal said, relieved that his mate was reliably sensible in most things that didn’t include dogs.

“Should Mina desire his absence,” Will said, giving Winston more play on his rope, “then I want to assist him in finding work.”

Hannibal glanced at him, brows up in question.

“Francis helped me during a very difficult time in my childhood,” Will said, and vague as it was Hannibal knew precisely what he was talking about. “Had he not done so, there is no telling what might have happened to either of us, or what he might have become.”

“Humanity has a gift for violence, Will, but it is not a trait everyone nurtures,” Hannibal said, taking him down the gravel path towards the modest stable. “Francis is who he is. His circumstances aside, no one has ever forced his hand to turn against his fellow man. Just as no external force turned your father’s hand against you.”

Will flinched but nodded, and said, “I know, it’s only... I feel responsible for him.”

“If your sister decides not to keep Francis in her household, I will see to it that he is given a position in the north,” Hannibal said, covering Will’s hand where it rested on his arm. “His behavior worries me and his interest in you is troubling, whatever he claims.”

One of the stable boys caught sight of them arriving and scurried to get the groom, who came out to meet them on the path, smiling and curious.

“Can I do something for you, my Lords?”

“Yes, you can,” Hannibal said. “As you can see, we acquired a dog in the city. He needs a proper collar and lead, and he definitely needs a wash.”

“I’ll get it sorted, my Lord,” the groom said, gesturing one of the little stable boys to his side. “The lads’ll have him spiffed up and a proper polished gentleman by tea time.”
“Thank you,” Will said, offering one of his rare, unguarded smiles. He bent to scratch Winston behind the ears and told him, “Behave for him, Winston, hear?”

Winston, however, growled as the stranger reached for him, surprising them all. Will tightened his grip on the lead instinctively as Winston jerked his head, frozen in stunned horror when the frayed rope snapped and broke free from the dog’s neck. Winston carried through on his momentum and dashed off into the woods without heeding Will’s startled, upset cry of his name.

“Don’t worry too much, my Lord,” the groom said, seeing the distress on Will’s face as he ran a few steps after Winston, drawing to a stop when the dog’s bushy tail vanished into the undergrowth. “There’s naught in the woods that will hurt him no more. Big predators has all been pushed out for lack of prey. He’ll wear himself out and come right back here.”

“I certainly hope you’re right,” Will said, craning to peer into the dense woods even though it was quite hopeless. “He isn’t used to the countryside.”

Hannibal lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder, also looking in the direction Winston had gone, but the forest was dense and impenetrable. “He'll get hungry and come back, Will, once he tires himself out chasing squirrels.”

“I hate to think I brought him to a strange place only to lose him entirely,” Will said, his anxiety almost palpable. He drew the rope between his hands, stricken by the idea he might have caused the poor animal’s unfortunate death. “I couldn’t stand to think he might... meet a bad end because of my being selfish.”

“He won’t meet a bad end without that rope tied around his neck, and you certainly aren’t selfish,” Hannibal assured him. “He’ll be back, Will.”

“That’s right, m’Lord!” the groom said, eager to allay his fears. He plucked the rope from Will’s hands and tossed it at the stable boy to get rid of it. “A faithful heart always brings you back home, don’t it? He’s just scared a bit, that’s all. I’ll get the things ready and send one of the boys up with them, so you’ll have them when he comes back, hm?”

“Thank you, that is very kind,” Will said, reluctant to leave for fear that Winston might come back and not be able to find him, but as Hannibal reminded him, a dog’s nose was of far more use than a person’s. Winston would be able to trail Will wherever he went if he was of a mind to. It had to settle the situation for the moment, and Will had to content himself with hoping they all were right and Winston would find his way home.

The frightened defection of Winston left Will unsettled and in need of an outlet, which writing to Mina did little to satisfy. He kept it simple and direct, explaining the events surrounding Francis’ absence and the concern it caused.

_I find that the wisest course, dear Mina, is to return Francis to you, as he is more a danger to my peace of mind than any unknown assailant is to my safety. If you did not send him to the Capital on your business, if you feel you are no longer safe in his company, please go at once to His Grace and simply say so. Francis will be given lodgings down in Hartford Town until Hannibal can arrange suitable employment for him in the North._

_The other possibility is one I dare not entertain, but must address. Mina, if you have sent Francis on some task and he has felt compelled to murder two men to protect the secrecy of your interests—if he did, indeed, murder them in truth—then I pray you would confide in me what manner of unsavory situation you are embroiled in and allow my husband and I to assist you. You are my sister. We shared a womb before we shared a cradle, and there is no horror of deed which could affect my love for you. I will do everything in my power to help you, no matter what._

He closed with his usual well wishes and love and prepared the letter for sending, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves. He wished he had accepted Hannibal’s offer to remain with him, but his husband had his own letters to write and he had no desire to alarm Francis. He also had no certainty that Francis had done anything wrong in the least, but his instincts warned him something simply wasn’t right. Given the revelation of the connection Francis claimed, Will could not feel easy with him.

It was in everyone’s best interests to send Francis away—two Alphas near an unmated Omega could only be playing havoc with everyone’s senses and Will knew he was making the right decision... yet a part of him truly felt for Francis Dolarhyde. They shared the unhappy reality of a bond forced by violent circumstances, each from a different end but resulting in the same
unfortunate connection. Whatever Francis was guilty of, whatever he did or did not do, Will hoped separation would grant him a little more peace than being in the presence of something he would never have.

Determined, he took his finished letter and went to his door to find Francis in his usual place on the landing, pensive and glowering in his constant state of watchful agitation.

“Mr. Dolarhyde,” Will said, retreating to formality. He held the letter out and Francis looked at it as if Will offered him an asp instead.

Will took a step forward and Francis reached for it, reluctant, his blue eyes searching Will’s face for a clue to his thoughts. “I need you to take this to my sister.”

“You wish me to leave you?” Francis asked, the words sharp with dismay. The wood smoke scent of his skin crisped to sulfur in an instant, agitation filling the muscular bulk of his body.

“I wish you to deliver that letter to my sister’s hands personally,” Will said, ignoring the flutter of upset in his chest that rose in response. “It is important to me that she receives it in all haste.”

Francis’ hand shook as he stared at the letter. His gaze flicked to Will’s face and he said, “You’re unhappy.” It had the hard edge of accusation, of suspicion and offense Will would dare demand something of him that induced such a feeling.

“I am,” Will admitted, knowing well enough it was no use to lie. “It distresses me to cause anyone pain, Francis... and I fear I’ve caused you pain.”

“My pain is of no matter, my Lord,” Francis said. “Your safety—”

“My safety is ensured by my husband, Mr. Dolarhyde,” Will told him, heading his argument off. “As it should be.”

Francis subsided. He tucked the letter into his breast pocket, disturbed and uneasy, a glowering, blue-eyed dragon with empty talons bereft of his treasure.

“Please pack your valise,” Will said, his voice quiet but firm, breathing softly lest that brimstone scent scorch his lungs to crumbling coal. “Anything you leave behind will be packed for you and sent on.”

Francis smiled, a bitter and small thing that spoke to his deep disquiet. “You mean to be rid of me.”

“I mean to release you from your charge, Francis,” Will said, using his given name on impulse. “I know how difficult your... particular set of circumstances can be. I will spare you what unhappiness I can.”

“And what of your unhappiness, my Lord?” Francis asked, head bowed but shoulders tight with tension.

“I have been happy with Hannibal, Francis, and very much so,” Will said, and asked with a troubled frown, “Can you not sense it?”

Francis looked up sharply at him, eyes narrowed. He held Will’s gaze for a long, tense moment, finally looking away when Will refused to break contact first. He bowed his head to Will, stiff formality overtaking him, and said, “I will deliver your letter, Lord Clarges.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dolarhyde.”

Will watched him go, fighting the nervousness that gripped him as Francis vanished on his duty, knowing without a doubt he had not seen the last of Francis Dolarhyde and wishing their parting could have come some other, far more pleasant way.

His search for Hannibal in the wake of Francis leaving took Will to Mr. Wells’ office and the Lords Clarges spent the remainder of the afternoon in busy pursuit of progress to distract them from the weight of their worries. They and Mr. Wells met with their new work crew, deciding on where best to run the pipes and trying to finalize when the second crew could begin on the interior, running gas lines and piping for their updates. There was no time or occasion to talk of other things, for which both of them were grateful.

It was taxing work in the details, which Hannibal found as diverting as he found his husband’s sharp intelligence. Will’s mind continuously impressed him. The serious little Omega never forgot a single thing he was told, for good or for ill, and easily relayed from memory what Mr. Wells had to check for in his notes. But it was fascinating and exhausting, and both of them were glad of the distraction after the events of the day.
Dinner that evening was a quiet affair in the dreaded dining room after baths to soak off their busy day. They were undisturbed by anyone and the peaceful quiet allowed the two of them to exchange the other matters that had occurred—the absence of Francis Dolarhyde as well as the disturbing information Jack had shared with Hannibal in Moseley.

Will took the news of the disappearances with his usual somber calm, only the furrow between his brows speaking of his worry.

“Needless to say,” Hannibal said, lingering over his after-dinner brandy. “I have packed Berger off with a pile of letters already this evening. What a sorry, ugly mess, in all.”

“And you could not imagine much of interest ever happens here,” Will said, reminding him of his words their first morning at Marsham. “There are seven girls, to date?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, knowing very well that Will recalled it, but confirming all the same. “It is damnably unlucky we fled one would-be killer only to find ourselves in the presence of one in practice. You do seem to attract trouble.”

“I certainly hope you are including yourself in that statement,” Will said, tapping the table with his sharp fingernail, and Hannibal grinned, pleased to be scolded.

“Oh, I always include myself in anything involving my beautiful mate,” Hannibal said, reaching across the table to twine his fingers with Will’s. “But it is frightening to think there is someone here in Moseley who is taking children for gods alone know what sort of horrors.”

“I do not like Mr. Hobbs very much, but I am grateful Abigail is with him just now,” Will said, turning his hand in Hannibal’s, an idle play of fingers as his thoughts grew heavy. “She has the same look as the other girls. She probably was friends with no few of them. As distasteful and rude as he was, Mr. Hobbs seemed to be deeply dedicated to her.”

“Alpha males do tend to be somewhat fierce when it comes to their offspring,” Hannibal reminded him.

“She isn’t his in the biological sense,” Will said, the words absent as an afterthought. “Abigail was adopted as a baby. Mrs. Hobbs confided that he is unable to sire children. No Omega would have him, she said. It was a terribly sad story to hear from her.”

“Sterile?” Hannibal echoed, brows rising. “It is no wonder he behaved so strangely towards you, Will, considering you are in your prime and as yet unbonded.”

Will flushed at that, but Hannibal put it down to nerves, telling him, “A sterile Alpha’s scent betrays them, even to other Alphas. It may be his own sensitivity to scent has strengthened in the search for a compatible match.”

“Mrs. Hobbs did ask me if I was bothered by the smell of bread yeasts,” Will said, remembering how fragile and nervous she’d seemed. “Perhaps it is as you said. What an awful stress that must put on him. I would avoid Omegas, too, were I him.”

“It is a blessed unhappy situation and little wonder his behavior caused you concern,” Hannibal agreed, leaving a brandy-tinged kiss on Will’s fingertips. “What on earth did you say to inspire such confidences from Mrs. Hobbs, having only just met?”

“I tried to put her at ease by asking about Abigail and she told me everything. It seems to burden her, the poor woman. She believed my interest to have a more sinister purpose related to Abigail’s adoption,” Will said, thoughtful. “She said Abigail has expressed an interest in finding her birth parents, which has understandably upset them all. Mr. Hobbs was incensed when I mentioned Abigail by name and Mrs. Hobbs was so very nervous when I visited this afternoon. Are you certain the Lecters have had no dealings with the Hobbs?”

“As certain as I am that your eyebrows are very thoughtful right now,” Hannibal said, smoothing a fingertip of one of the brows in question, which was drawn down in a frown over Will’s eye.

The frown cleared at the touch, but his concern did not.

“Bella said they shelter her enormously, perhaps they simply do not like strangers taking too much interest in a child they have raised as their own?” Hannibal offered.

“It seems something more than that,” Will breathed. “Abigail is searching for where she came from. Perhaps they fear someone will come looking for her, instead.”

“It will all come out in time,” Hannibal said, just gazing at him in open appreciation before he gained his feet and offered to escort Will upstairs.
“This has been an entirely Uncommon day,” Will sighed, not in any hurry to end it all the same. They came to his door and he leaned against the frame, casting a glance out at the darkness beyond the hallway window. “I do hope Winston is safe.”

“And I do hope I have not filled your head with haunts for the evening,” Hannibal said, leaning next to him, glittering affection in his amber gaze.

“Seven missing children who could all be sisters in appearance?” Will asked, and added with a smirk, “No, of course not! How silly to think something such as that should bother me.”

“If you get frightened, you can always come sleep with me,” Hannibal offered.

“If that is an offer for comfort, Lord Clarges?” Will inquired, his full mouth curving into a smile. “Or do you wish to better make my acquaintance through an absence of clothing?”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal murmured, and tipped his head towards Will’s.

The newel post lamp was lit, the only light in the darkened hallway. The distant glow of its warm orange light cast shadows on the planes of Hannibal’s face, throwing dark hollows beneath the curve of his cheekbone and pooling at the corner of his mouth.

Will’s smile faded as his lips parted, his lids dropping to shield his blue eyes. He had the irresistible urge to kiss Hannibal’s lips to find out if they tasted of brandy and darkness.

Hannibal’s warm breath teased his mouth when he asked, “May I?”

Will tipped his head and captured Hannibal’s mouth instead, turning to cup his cheek with one hand, the other falling to Hannibal’s waist as he stepped close.

The exquisite pull and gentle urgency of lips and tongue would never cease to be as blissfully exciting as it had been the first time. Each kiss seemed a first kiss, in truth—just as thrilling, just as nerve-wracking, just as deeply fulfilling.

It was a soft embrace of flesh and scent, confirmation they were here together. This pleasant escape was a tender reminder that for all the horrors outside these walls, they were warm and alive and reaching for one another, a much-needed comfort for them both.

It brought such a rush of trembling relief to him Will was hardly aware of Hannibal’s hands at his back, tugging him close until they pressed into each other, tense and trembling.

Something shifted in the kiss, the reassurance overcome by desire. Every plunge of Hannibal’s tongue within his mouth, every answering press of his own, every half-smothered moan that escaped them both only to be swallowed between them, all of it stoked the fevered weight in Will’s belly, fed by the answering ache of hunger flooding him from his bond to Hannibal.

“Will,” Hannibal whispered, breaking the kiss to suck on his lower lip, his sharp teeth grazing his silken skin. “You will be the undoing of me.”

Will bit him in response, a tease of teeth and a flick of his tongue before he pulled back, his breath coming in ragged pants. He rested forehead to forehead and Will stroked his cheek once more before he murmured, “Sweet dreams, Lord Clarges.”

Hannibal closed his eyes and sighed, but he was smiling, pleased with their little game and Will’s determination. He squeezed Will to him, undeniable evidence of his interest apparent in brief, tight contact that made Will’s breath catch. But like the gentleman he was, Hannibal released him and stepped back to get the door for him.

“Goodnight, Lord Clarges,” he said, gesturing Will within.

Will moved into his suite and closed the door, leaning on it. When he heard Hannibal softly say, “By all the gods, certainly the undoing of me,” he bit his lip against a pleased, happy grin.

Will drew on the enjoyment and relief of that kiss as he began to undress for bed. He’d only just managed to peel his clothes off down to his shirt and pants when a muted knock came at the door. He could hear Hannibal in his own suite, so he moved cautiously to ask, “Yes? Who is it?”

“It’s Jimmy,” came the reply, and Will opened the door to find his valet there waiting. He sheepishly smiled and said, “I figured I should knock from now on, just in case. But I wanted to tell you that your dog is back.”

“He is?” Will asked, a flare of relief shooting through him.
“He was scratching at the back entrance,” Jimmy said, pleased to see him so happy. “He’s filthy as can be, so Cook fed him some roast and put him in the coal room for the night with a water bucket.”

“The coal room?” Will asked, dismayed. “Was that really necessary?”

“He’s been rolling in gods know what and all you can see of him are his eyes,” Jimmy whispered, chuckling. “He gave Cook quite a start! But he’s right as rain and very glad to be in out of the woods, poor city boy! I’ll have the groom give him a scrub come morning and bring him to you.”

“Thank you, Jimmy, it’s quite a relief to know he’s come back and he’s not hurt,” Will said, whispering, too, so as not to disturb Hannibal.

“Do you need some help?” Jimmy offered, spying Will’s state of undress. There was a twinkle in his blue eyes when he added, “Or is his Lordship helping y—”

“Go to bed, Jimmy,” Will scolded, closing the door with a soft laugh. He moved back to the dressing room to finish undressing and get himself to bed, but he couldn’t bear the thought of Winston spending the night in the coal room, even if it was probably the nicest room he’d ever found himself in to now.

Resolved, Will waited until his husband’s suite fell silent and then he took up his lamp. Dressed only in his nightshirt and robe, he sneaked back downstairs barefoot in the dark, the contours of Marsham Heath rearranging into sinister shadows by lamplight, stark and unfamiliar.

The coal room was just off the kitchen, separated by a short passage to keep the dust down. Will eased open the door and Winston lifted his head from his paws, his eyes bright and alert but his tail thumping up a cloud of dust.

“You have to be quiet,” Will whispered, pressing his finger to his lips. “Winston, come.”

The dog obeyed, more at the firm hand gesture than at the unfamiliar name. He kept close as Will fired the boiler again, feeding it coal enough to warm the tank up before it would burn out. The dog didn’t so much as sniff sideways at anything, cowed by the strange sights and smells of the indoors. He followed Will back upstairs and into the washroom, only whining when Will closed the door.

“It’s okay,” Will whispered to him, settling the lamp in its ornate grip. “Let’s get you cleaned up, hm? And then we’ll both of us have a nice sleep.”

He pushed the pump handle, wincing at the shriek it gave, loud as a siren in the silence, the splatter of heated water like thunder in the aged porcelain tub. Winston flattened his ears and retreated to the corner, leaving a little pattering of doggy footprints across the floor.

Will filled the tub only partially and paused, waiting and alert, finally satisfied that he had not disturbed his husband. He stripped off his robe and hung it safely out of danger before rolling up the sleeves on his nightshirt.

“Now, don’t fuss,” he whispered, and hefted Winston into the tub.

Winston whined, uneasy with the whole matter but trusting the man who soothed him. He held perfectly still as Will sluiced water over him, the runoff gritty and muddy with filth.

“Good boy,” Will whispered, rubbing his thick ears and muzzle as he worked. “You are a handsome fellow, aren’t you? Hm? And you’ll look much more handsome once you’re cleaned up a bit.”

The dog tried to wag his sodden tail but only succeeded in sloshing water onto Will, who quickly pushed his haunches down and got to work with the soap.

It was relaxing work, mindless, allowing his thoughts to revisit the last few days in exquisite detail. Thoughts of his close call with Mason bothered him and were quickly shunted aside in favor of their night at the Masquerade. He smiled as the night replayed itself at his whim, swaying gently to an imaginary waltz while he knelt next to the tub. He didn’t realize he wasn’t alone, didn’t realize he was humming softly beneath his breath until his husband’s earthy Alpha scent teased him to awareness, solidifying from sense memory to the present.

“Well, well,” Hannibal purred, amused by the picture his little mate made. “What have we here?”

Startled, Will froze in the act of rinsing Winston’s final soaping and said, “This is... precisely what it looks like.”

Hannibal’s brow quirked up at that. He angled a look at Will’s body, the pearly-pink hue of his skin visible beneath his damp nightshirt, one long thigh starkly outlined where water had turned the cloth transparent over the curve of his muscle. He
looked like a little naiad kneeling there next to the tub in just his nightshirt and underclothes, water dripping from one curl and running down his kiss-bruised throat, a siren whose promise was balm and delight, worth any shipwreck to reach him.

“Yes, I see,” he said, appreciating Will's beauty as a feast in itself. “That isn’t all I see, however.”

“Are you ogling me?” Will asked, torn between offense and amusement. A set down died on his lips when he realized his husband had come investigating in nothing more than the loose linen pants he preferred to sleep in, very similar to the ones Will himself usually wore. His broad shoulders and wide chest were bared, as was the furring of silvering hair that trailed down over the slight dome of his belly to vanish in the waist of his pants.

“I think I should ask that question,” Hannibal pointedly said, and Will smiled.

“As a matter of fact,” he said, wrinkling his snub nose in a grin, “I am. I have very few occasions to ogle you, after all.”

“I am always happy to accommodate an ogling from you, Will,” Hannibal said, moving closer to the tub to inspect Winston. “Well, you’re very nearly finished. Here, pull the drain and I’ll fill from the pump. The boiler must be fairly tapped by now, hm?”

“Thank you,” Will said, genuinely touched as his husband joined him, cleaning Winston up and toweling him as dry as his thick, brindled coat would allow for. He behaved himself, only starting to fuss once Hannibal lifted him out of the tub in a towel, though Will easily calmed him with a soft but firm cluck of his tongue.

“You have a way with dogs, Will,” Hannibal observed, smiling slightly as he settled Winston’s wet paws on the slick tile.

“Or perhaps you’re simply attracted to things which need your help.”

“Do you need my help, Hannibal?” Will asked, roughing Winston’s jowls with both hands, though his blue eyes were on his husband.

“Are you attracted to me?” Hannibal asked with a smirk, feeling Will’s eyes tracing the slope of his shoulders again, furtive and aware.

Will chuffed a low, embarrassed laugh, his little Omegan fangs bared in a grin. “I don’t think attraction can be questioned; but I also don’t think either one of us is interested in a quick-burning bonfire.”

“Nothing so banal as that could ever bring us satisfaction,” Hannibal murmured, reaching out to smooth Will’s hair back from his forehead, smiling at the way he leaned into his touch ever so little. “But if you are ever so inclined, there is no law saying we can’t enjoy feeding our little flame.”

Will turned his face just slightly, scenting Hannibal’s wrist. Even through damp dog, soap, and well water, the mouth-watering flavor of his Alpha scent rose to the top and Will drew it in, exhaling on a soft sigh.

“What would you feed it?” he asked, his hands idly stroking the restless dog’s head. He looked at Hannibal from beneath the heavy fringe of his lashes, his gaze all the more sultry for its innocence.

“Anything,” Hannibal said, his voice falling to a husky purr.

“Anything?” Will echoed, brows rising. “Even though I am not yet decided on accepting the fullness of your advances?”

“Your decisions are your own,” Hannibal confirmed. “I am content to wait until such time as you decide, preferably in my favor. Being near you is a pleasure of its own, Will. Everything else is a gift that is yours to give when it pleases you.”

It gave Will a visceral thrill to hear it, to have acknowledgment of the vast and voracious attraction between them that pleasures of the flesh were incidental to, something to be experienced as a culmination of their mutual regard, enriching it all the more.

“With every gesture you make, every flutter of your eyelashes, every touch of your tongue to your lip, every lift of your eyes to mine when you look at me clear to my depths, you’re feeding it,” Hannibal said, the admission felt as much as heard. “To hold you? To be near you? Croesus himself would envy my fortune.”

Will leaned into his touch just a fraction more before retreating, his blue eyes almost brown in the lamplight, the most beautiful eyes Hannibal had ever seen. He let his hand fall from Will’s cheek and straightened, satisfied that he had made himself clear. Will’s eyes tracked him, noting how he opened the doors, first to his own suite and then to Will’s, the option standing just as wide.

Will hadn’t a chance to ponder the significance—Winston saw his opportunity and made a break for it. He bounded out of the washroom, straight across Will’s bed, and dove beneath the skirt on the corner writing desk.
“Winston! Oh, look at what you’ve done,” Will said, staring at the bedding marred with wet paw prints and a trail of sooty drips. It struck him funny somehow, his long day and the absurdity of what had just happened colliding to create a burble of amusement he simply couldn’t hold back. He laughed, horrified but amused, and Hannibal glowered at the scene before him.

“I am so sorry,” Will said, gasping for breath but unable to stop laughing. “Oh, gods, what a mess!”

Hannibal turned back towards his suite and for a moment Will was certain he was going to walk right past him and call it a night.

Instead, he scooped Will up by the waist and carried him into his bedroom, leaving the doors standing wide behind him.

They fell in a tangle on Hannibal’s bed, exhausted and laughing and damp from Winston’s bath, unable to put up a moment more of fight.

“This is nice,” Will sighed, his legs tangled with Hannibal’s, his husband’s strong arms tight around him. His fingers twined in the hair over Hannibal’s heart, teasing and light until they stilled, his breathing evening out.

“Are you sleeping already?” Hannibal asked, drawing a deep breath as his lids fluttered closed.

“Mmm... you smell like a wet dog,” Will said, the words half a sigh as he snuggled against Hannibal’s body, the chill from his damp clothes vanishing with Hannibal’s Alpha heat.

“Should I tell you what you smell like?” Hannibal asked, chuckling when Will nodded and stifled a yawn.

He pressed a kiss to Will’s temple, tender and soft where the faintest trace of his bruise was still visible. With gentle affection, he murmured, “You smell like home.”

Will smiled, tipping his face to Hannibal’s, letting his lips brush his husband’s when he asked, “And what does home smell like?”

His fingers shifted again, fingernails lightly scratching Hannibal’s chest, an affectionate caress for a sleek, furry cat. Hannibal certainly purred as if he was one, a pleasant rumble that vibrated through Will’s body and down his spine to coil in the pit of his stomach.

“Home smells like sunshine,” Hannibal whispered, stroking Will’s long back in a soothing sweep. “It smells like the heat of your skin when you blush.”

His amber eyes opened, barely able to make out Will’s features in the faint light from the washroom lamp until his sight adjusted.

“It smells like fine wine and the mint of your lips in the morning,” he breathed, a pleasant shiver coursing through him when Will’s mouth pressed to the pulse in his throat, his heart picking up its pace in response. “Home smells like fevered sweetness and rich cream and the faintest trace of salt.”

Those fingers drifted over the curve of his chest, brushing the delicate skin of one nipple so lightly it seemed by accident.

“Sometimes,” Hannibal said, his breathing unsteady as Will’s sensitive fingertips traced the tight nub with gentle intensity.

“It smells like wet dog.”

Will chuckled, rolling to hitch his damp, shapely thigh up over Hannibal’s lean hip.

“I expect,” he whispered, trading fingertips for his thumb, teasing Hannibal’s responsive flesh until his nipple stood tight and hard. “That wet dog will be rather more present from now on.”

Hannibal moaned softly, his hand daring to seek out the curve of Will’s bottom, which was every bit as perfect as previously hinted at. He splayed his fingers over the warm, taut muscle, giving him an appreciative squeeze. “Only if you let me join you when you dole out baths. I wouldn’t want to miss a chance to ogle you.”

Will’s low laugh was almost inaudible, fading away to soft silence and desire. He flattened his hand over Hannibal’s chest, feeling the hard kernel of flesh press up against his palm, and stroked him again before stretching slightly. He reveled in the heat of Hannibal against him, in his musky scent and strength and the comfort of being so close to him.

Hannibal stretched with him, sweeping his hand up Will’s round bottom to the curve of his lower back, Will’s naked skin warm and inviting beneath the hiked, bunched lip of his nightshirt. Will tensed as Hannibal touched his scars, then subsided, relaxing against him as Hannibal’s large palm swept up his skin and down again in long, soothing strokes.

Pressed belly to belly, it was difficult to mistake the heat that grew between them, all the stronger for being unintended. Their eyes met for just a heartbeat in the gloom before their lips did, bodies drawing together with slow but insistent desire.
Will's hand curled against the base of Hannibal's skull without him meaning it to, every inch of him reaching for his husband in the darkness. The play of his tongue was intoxicating, a soft and gentle encouragement to be kissed in return. Will tilted his head and his hips arched, his sex stirring in response, rasping pleasantly against Hannibal's warm belly. The hand pressing to the base of his spine burned like a brand, spurring Will to press closer. When Hannibal's palm dropped once more to cup one firm, pert cheek on his backside, Will arched in time with his urging, hips pulsing to press his fattening sex against Hannibal's belly.

Hannibal broke the kiss, trailing his mouth over Will's cheek to nip his earlobe, dropping his lips to Will's throat and covering it with sucking kisses. Will wriggled against him, breathing fast with excitement. He tasted of eager anticipation with a hint of nerves, though the sweet-hot flavor of his desire drowned everything out.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed, squeezing his bottom, so round and firm in his palm, like a ripe peach begging for a bite. The heat of Will's skin through the texture of his nightshirt and the flimsy excuse of his underclothes brought Hannibal to trembling attention, awed that anyone as perfectly delightful as his mate could exist. His fingers moved of their own will, curling, tracing the cleft of Will's buttocks to brush between them in cautious exploration, curious and seeking. Hannibal knew the anatomy of an Omega, as any qualified doctor should, but learning the contours of his mate's toned young body through the thin material of his underpants was a revelation of swelling arousal. His fingers drifted down to the tight ring of Will's bottom, garnering a stifled, indignant noise that he hushed with deeper kisses. The small stretch of skin between that little pucker and what he sought was smooth, firm, giving way to his entrance, slick, hot, and taut behind the tight weight of his sac.

“Will,” he moaned, his mate arching against him as the touch brushed his full sac, awakening an insistent pulse through the hard heat against him. He sucked on Will's throat to distract himself, his response to his husband so strong he feared he might embarrass them both.

Will swept his hand down Hannibal's nape and powerful shoulder, over his hard chest and under his arm to his side. The fingers tracing his slit were startling and exciting, the light sensation of Hannibal's sensitive fingertips feeling him through his clothing an aching pleasure that teased as much as it satisfied. Sharp teeth raked lightly over his neck, bringing a wash of goosebumps to his skin. Desire burned in his belly like a live coal—the desire to know and be known, to feel sensation paired to emotion.

To touch Hannibal and be touched in return.

Hannibal found his mouth once more in the darkness and kissed him, a muffled groan escaping him when Will rocked his hips up in a little movement to wriggle closer, the friction an utterly delightful torment.

“I don't know what to do,” Will whispered, his words broken by his ragged breath, hesitance borne of chronic self-doubt rearing its ugly head to drown him in uncertainty.

“Do whatever you would like to do,” Hannibal murmured, brushing his curved lips over Will's in a brief, breathless kiss, “except beat me with a trout.”

Will's delighted laughter was swallowed in another deep, searching kiss and he clung to Hannibal like a lifeline, safe and secure against his broad chest, his uncertainty rapidly wilting in the face of Hannibal's encouragement. It was thrilling and terrifying to have unfettered access to his husband's powerful, beautiful body. Will couldn't resist his impulses, couldn't deny the deep excitement he felt with every soft moan he earned, every approving kiss, every whispered praise for touches that grew bolder and more inquisitive with each thumping heartbeat.

Will returned Hannibal's tender worship, returned those lazy, sweet kisses and gentle, seeking touches, chasing a shiver down the valley of Hannibal's spine, tracing a path over his side to his belly to find where the hair began to thicken as it swept lower. He touched the crease of his groin and shaped it with his fingers, gasping when the strutted thrust of Hannibal's sex surged against him, awakening an answering throb that echoed inside of him. He felt empty but full, as if this need might unfold from within him like a flower opening petal by petal until he was ready to be plumbed to his depths. His full sac tightened, drawing up to bare the way, and Will moaned when Hannibal curled his fingertips against that small, wet, and waiting place yet again.

The desire to allow it was heady, immediate and insistent like the need he felt during his heat and all the sweeter for not being so steeped in wretched desperation.
Will’s breath caught on a gasp when Hannibal’s hand slid away from his tight and untried entrance, drifting back to brush the clenched pucker of his bottom before gliding up and over his side. Those gentle, questing fingers moved dangerously close to where Will’s own ready sex tested the bonds of his underclothes, pushing up against the cloth to pulse between their bellies. He wanted it so much, and feared it so much, a touch which might break him for good and all, because surely, surely such sweet pleasure had a price?

But Hannibal didn’t touch him, not then, not yet. He drew back a fraction, a shadow in the darkness with a halo of golden light.

“May I?” he asked, his fingers toying with the hem of Will’s damp nightshirt.

Will nodded, his voice unsteady when he said, “Yes.”

Propped on his elbow, warm and looming in the darkness, Hannibal teased the fine material open bit by bit, revealing Will’s lean, hairless belly as if unwrapping a treasure not meant for mortal eyes.

Hannibal found that Will’s knees, dangerous as they were, couldn’t hold a candle to the expanse of his trim, flat belly. He took his time touching him, feeling the texture of Will’s soft skin, the way his body tightened and shifted at his touch. Will’s breath came out in a stuttering exhale of excitement when Hannibal slid the cloth off of one shoulder, fingers tracing the curve of his chest and mouth parting in soundless approval.

He was perfect. He was poetry given form and breath and life, so achingly beautiful Hannibal fixed this moment in his mind, greedily hoarding it for those lonely nights when his mate would not have him, for a quiet moment when he could capture Will on paper—half-lidded eyes and parted lips and flushed cheeks an exquisite ode to love.

Will shivered in the sudden cold, but Hannibal’s heat chased it away, leaving him secure in his husband’s promise to him—only as far as he wanted and no more. The impulse to touch came on the heels of the impulse to know, as if there was no part of his husband that Will was content to leave in mystery, even down to his skin. Intimacy was something neither one of them was accustomed to or had ever felt was necessary, yet it came to them naturally with one another, and neither wanted to stop it.

Will wriggled his other arm free and flung the nightshirt to the floor, bared to his husband’s gaze but for his underpants. He could feel Hannibal’s amber eyes searching his chest and his nipples tightened in reaction. He bit back a gasp, his hips canting up in a brief, hard friction that made them both shudder hard, and roused his husband once more.

“You are absolutely incredible, Will,” Hannibal murmured, entranced by the plump, large nipples darkening beneath his gaze, twin shadows of color on the pale canvas of Will’s body in the lamp-lit darkness. There was a fullness to Will’s chest that enticed him, neither masculine nor feminine but perfectly both, perfectly neither. The shape was enhanced by his husband’s active lifestyle, defining the gentle curves of his chest and creating two plump little handfuls offering up his large nipples. Those alluring peaks tightened even more in response to Hannibal’s appreciative gaze and he whispered, “You’re very sensitive, aren’t you?”

Will nodded, wetting his lips, aching with the desire for Hannibal to touch him there. He could feel Hannibal’s pounding pulse echo in the throb of flesh pushing up between his spread legs and was seized with the sudden desire to close his oft-discussed thighs around that tempting bulk until Hannibal came undone.

It left him simultaneously appalled at himself and achingly aroused.

Hannibal lifted his hand to Will’s cheek, turning it to graze his knuckles over the curve of his jaw and down his collarbone. In a throaty whisper, he asked, “Do you touch them?”

“No,” Will answered, blushing but responsive. “It bothers me even when my clothing brushes them so I try not to touch them at all. Jimmy binds them for me.”

What he really wanted to say was that he wanted Hannibal to touch them, and bit his lip to hold it back. He almost couldn’t restrain the noise that threatened to escape him when Hannibal asked, “May I?”

Will nodded, the movement jerky but certain.

Mouth parting in anticipation, Hannibal shifted and bent his head over Will’s body to exhale softly over one ruddy peak, a deep shudder running through him at the thought of what he was about to do. Will moaned, arching his throat up in offering, eyes sweeping closed as warm heat brushed his hard nipple. He swallowed with difficulty, his fingers squeezing at Hannibal’s shoulder, digging in hard when Hannibal lightly flicked his tongue over the taut peak jutting up as if begging to be teased.
Will sobbed, gasping, straining against Hannibal's grip and pushing up to feel more of Hannibal's hot, wet tongue on his sensitive skin. Another stab brought another flush of pleasure and he writhed, his flesh throbbing at the touch, tender and aching.

“You are very sensitive,” Hannibal whispered, a husky deep purr that sent hot breath spilling over Will's slick nipple. He whimpered, a flush suffusing him from cheeks to knees as his body eagerly responded to Hannibal's ministrations. The steady, instinctive push of groin against groin tested Hannibal's strength to the point he wasn't sure if he could hold back much longer.

Eyes half closed in sensual delight, Hannibal curled his tongue around Will's nipple and fastened his mouth over it, sucking lightly, lashing the pointed nub with his tongue. He palmed the softness of his chest, cupping him to better lift Will's heated flesh into his mouth for a gentle graze of his sharp teeth.

Will bucked against him, the scent of his body suddenly stronger as he writhed, a mouth-watering sweetness that Hannibal wanted to devour at its source. Even the thought of it made a surge run through his heavy sex and he suckled harder, Will's strong hands clenching as he arched against Hannibal's mouth, pulling on him to force their bodies closer.

Hannibal growled under his breath and shifted them both just enough trail his mouth to Will's other plump little breast, freeing his hand to touch his other wide nipple, wet-slick and hard. He gently rolled it between thumb and forefinger, moaning at the way Will keened his pleasure aloud, at how his thick scent rose heavy into the air to pluck his instincts like tightly wound strings. It sated him to hear Will cry out like that and drove him to do more, filling him with the Alpha desire to make Will scream so loudly everyone would know he was being drowned in pleasure, so there was no doubt in any mind that he was thoroughly and completely cherished from his curls to his adorable little toes.

Will sobbed when his other nipple was suckled, the pressure of lips and tongue driving him into a frenzy of need. Eyes hazy with desire, his hips rocked with want, rubbing his hard sex against Hannibal's while he tongued and teased his nipple. “Hannibal,” he moaned, a deep and languorous sensation uncoiling through him and filling him with sensual delight.

Hannibal suckled him harder, a painful pleasure that stole coherent thought and brought him to the trembling cusp of release. “Ah! Oh, gods, Hannibal!”

Hannibal closed his eyes, taking his own pleasure in Will's soft moans, in the throb of his full sex, in the way those slender fingers flew to tangle in his hair, urging him on and tugging. He had never in his life experienced such heady need, never dreamed that intimacy such as this could exist, that he could exchange his life of stoic removal for this insatiable hunger unique to Will.

Will's moans hit a pleading, fevered pitch that matched the tightening of his trim body. Hannibal responded by instinct to his mate's aroused cry and lifted his head to kiss Will's mouth, tender but ravenous, knowing he hadn't permission to ease the ache they'd caused in one another.

“Tell me to stop,” he breathed, and meant it, both of them knowing that was all it would ever take. One word, simple and short, but it wasn't the word Will spoke to him.

“No,” Will whispered instead. “Don't stop.”

He tipped his head to nuzzle into the scent of Hannibal's mussed hair, moaning softly when Hannibal's mouth locked over him again. The draw on his nipple sharpened, an almost-pain that sent his hand flying Hannibal's nape to hold him there, urging him on. He threw back his head and his wide eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, the whole of him lost in a place where pleasure didn't have a price, it just came freely for those who would dare to take it.

Hannibal gave him a final suck and pushed his mouth into the crook of Will's neck, searching out the marks he'd left on him and covering them in kisses before moving on to the graceful sweep of his shoulders, the tempting jut of his collarbone, the bunched muscle of his bicep—every inch he could reach, from the curve of his hip to the fluttering planes of his belly. All of it was precious, all of it was divine and he was driven to pay homage to him. And all the while Will rocked against him, the sweet arch of his body a begging all its own, maddeningly tempting and distracting.

“What you do to me,” Hannibal breathed, teeth closing briefly around the skin of Will's throat, a slight concession to the instinct that begged him to bite down, to sink fangs and body deep and claim him for good and all.

But it would never be so simple between them, nor so base, and the complexity of it was a challenge they both delighted in. Emboldened by Hannibal's soft praise and his own desire, wanting to share instead of simply take, Will reached down between the press of their bodies and skated his searching fingers over the firm, hot bulk of Hannibal's sex.
Hannibal twitched and Will snatched his hand back, gasping, “I’m sorry—”

The rest of his apology was stifled by the sudden plunge of Hannibal's tongue in his mouth, lips sealing over his in a hungry kiss. His husband's fingers moved to grasp his hand and settle his palm lower, more firmly over the bulge that gave a responsive throb against his palm.

Will moaned into the kiss, caressing him, mapping the swollen flesh with his hand, his imagination filling in details the future might provide him in truth.

Hannibal groaned, pushing against Will, pressing his hand over his again to urge more pressure. Will's strong fingers shaped him through his thin pants and wrapped around the base of his sex, giving him a firm squeeze that stole Hannibal's breath and wrung another moan out of him. Those questing fingers found the loose skin of his knot and explored it, dropped lower to drift over the fat bulge of his sac. Hannibal shifted slightly, turning to give Will more room, rewarded by a careful but curious cupping rub that made his belly tighten and his hips arch.

Will marveled at the weight and bulk of him, an Alpha's physique made for breeding, a remnant physicality from the days when Alphas spread their seed far and wide as fast as they could, as often as they could.

Unwilling to lose even a second of this moment with his beautiful husband, Hannibal distracted himself from the inquisitive, exquisitely determined hand on his body by stroking his little mate's trim, sturdy body from the curve of his hip to the curve of his jaw. He cupped the slight fullness of his chest as he laved him with tender kisses and teased Will's pert nipple with cautious force, pleased by the way Will moaned and arched into his touch, his hand squeezing in reflex that wrung a throaty groan from Hannibal's mouth.

He stifled it by sealing his mouth over Will’s, a raspy, rumbling purr breaking from him. He closed his eyes and lavished Will's soft lips with attention as his mate's deft and intuitive fingers found and tested the most sensitive nerves of his foreskin, a blunted touch felt keenly through the fine linen of his pants.

Hannibal returned the favor, a throaty moan breaking from him when he cupped his mate's sex and his knot began to rise in response to his looming climax.

Full, hot flesh filled his seeking palm, doubling his arousal when Will pushed against him with a sobbing, startled cry of excitement, tongues twined and mouths meshed.

It was far more intimate than either had first intended, and far more enjoyable than they had ever expected. Entwined with his husband, sharing kisses and teasing, coaxing touches until pleasure spilled over into trembling, shared release gasped against each other’s mouths, Will was forced to admit he was deeply attracted to his mate. It wasn’t their improper bond. It wasn’t the fact that Hannibal was an exemplary example of an Alpha, strong and virile and in a position of power.

It was the crinkle at the corners of his eyes when he smiled.

It was the way the most minute expression could show on his face, saying so much without saying a word.

It was his laughter, sometimes throaty and abandoned, sometimes merely a deep chuckle.

It was the stark, bone-deep relief in his amber eyes when he swept Will up into his arms and said, ‘Gods, if I had lost you...’

It was the way he frowned when something displeased him, how his thoughts showed in his eyes as he considered ways to change that which he did not like, and how fearlessly and confidently he then changed those things—starting with himself.

It was how much he had already changed, how willing he was to admit what he had done wrong, how eager he was to correct himself and make amends.

It was a thousand little things that, taken as a whole, became a brilliant glow in the darkness of Will's heart, filling him from the inside out, finding all the cracks and mending them with something far more priceless than gold.

Pleasantly exhausted, thoroughly satiated, the air saturated with their mingled scents and spent sex, Will Lecter-Graham's heart made its decision, even if his head didn’t know it yet. Vast and bone-deep relief left him relaxed and content, kissing his husband as the lamp burned out and left them in darkness, still stroking one another through their sticky clothing, still catching their breath.

“Well, I wouldn’t say there was an absence of clothing,” Hannibal murmured, laying kisses up the column of Will’s throat before nuzzling into him, utterly at peace. “But I think we've better made one another's acquaintance.”
Will chuckled, still throbbing with the aftershocks of pleasure, unable to summon an ounce of shock at the liberties he'd allowed his husband to take with his person... or the liberties he'd taken in turn.

“That was rather educational,” he whispered, turning to nuzzle Hannibal back, glad of his heat and the way Hannibal lay draped over him. “I never imagined so much could be accomplished in one's undergarments.”

Hannibal laughed, a soft rasp of sound in the comfortable silence. He kissed Will's temple, a hint of concern in his deep voice when he asked, “Are you happy, Will?”

Will shook his head, a smile curving his full lips. “Yes, Hannibal. I am.”

He waited for regret to overtake him, for the worry to settle in, the dread he always felt when something went too well for too long, but it didn't come. It was as if he was stronger for Hannibal's presence, braver, less vulnerable to being stripped of what was precious to him. Or perhaps it was simply that he finally had something precious to protect, something too dear to risk losing after all this time.

“It's yours as long as you desire it, Will,” Hannibal told him, as if sensing the turn of his thoughts. "Nothing will take it from you, not if I can help it."

He placed hungry, loving, lingering kisses on Will's brow, his ears, his cheeks, nose, and mouth, on his throat and his shoulders, all the while breathing his name with awed reverence.

Will certainly felt revered, felt treasured.

But more, he felt loved, and what had happened between them was the result of that feeling, not the cause, and just as it should be.

“I will return it to you in excess of you expectations,” Hannibal reminded him, tucking Will close to keep him warm. “For as long as you will have me.”

Will smiled and nuzzled Hannibal's warm throat, content to drift with his husband into the waiting arms of Morpheus.

Morning brought the crew up from village along with Abigail, back from her trip with her father to resume her duties at Marsham Heath. One of Magistrate Crawford's men accompanied the workers as well, the same young officer who had escorted Will the day before, much to Will's consternation.

“I don’t want to hear any arguments,” Hannibal said, kissing the frown off of Will's face as they rose from their breakfast. Will's initial embarrassment had died a quick and definitive death under Hannibal's relentless determination not to acknowledge it, though he blushed furiously every time he caught Hannibal looking his way, as if he knew his husband was thinking of last night.

In his defense, Hannibal most certainly was.

“If you will not accompany me today, then someone will be with you in my place,” Hannibal insisted. “One of Jack's men will remain at Marsham Heath until we return to Hartford, Will. I insist on it”

“This is hardly necessary!” Will said, refusing to be kissed into good humor, though he hoped his husband would continue trying. “Mason Verger is being hunted by your Mr. Tier as we speak and there are far too many people—”

“Will,” Hannibal said, and the gentle reproach in his voice stilled Will's protests better than the kiss that followed. “I cannot bear the idea of you being in danger and even you must admit that in some things you are terribly impulsive.”

Will’s frown returned full force, but it was more thoughtful this time, less offended. He didn't resist when Hannibal embraced him, hugging him tight with a little sigh of contentment.

“Please allow it,” Hannibal said, holding his gaze. “For my peace of mind.”

Will heaved a sigh, thoroughly put out, but nodded all the same.

“You could come with me,” Hannibal coaxed, but Will shook his head, saying, “No, there is far too much work to be done and I want to be here for the first stages. Marsham Heath needs delicate handling and I will not have her harmed through inattention.”

Hannibal’s brows shot up and he smiled, saying, “Precisely the argument I should use for you, Will. In fact, when I return, I will try to seduce you.”

“Oh, really?” Will asked, finally cajoled into smiling.
“I will not have you harmed through inattention,” Hannibal teased, earning himself a sharp slap on his flank for his pertness. “Ah, but I hope an entire day without me will make you more amenable to my seduction.”

“I dare hope I might get some work done,” Will said, fishing his spectacles out and putting them on, his gaze pointed. “Off you go.”

Hannibal tipped Will’s head up with a soft touch under his chin and planted a thorough kiss on his full lips, warning him, “I’ll be back soon.”

Will held his gaze for a long moment, the shadow of past partings darkening the vivid blue of his eyes.

But Hannibal felt a thrill of victory when his little mate said with a small smile, “I know you will, Hannibal. A faithful heart always brings you back home, doesn’t it?”

Hannibal grinned, recognizing the saying and sharing his husband’s quiet amusement. They drew apart reluctantly, Hannibal holding onto his hand until that, too, was relinquished, though not without a parting kiss.

Will smoothed his jacket once Hannibal was out of sight, delaying a moment before moving to the window. He watched his husband emerge onto the drive, moving with swift surety and grace to mount his horse. He felt fairly caught out when Hannibal’s eyes turned to find him in the window, drawn to him in a way that defied explanation.

But Hannibal only lifted his hand, a gesture which Will returned to him with a smile even as his husband rode away. The pain of parting was no less sharp, but his heart was lightened by the knowledge Hannibal would come back to him.

He would always come back to him, Will could feel it in his bond, and that was enough to quell the ache to a bearable, dull pain.

Winston yipped and Will turned, as surprised to see Abigail before him as she was to find a dog before her.

“Miss Hobbs?” Will said, smiling at her. “Please don’t mind Winston, he’s friendly. Is there something I can do for you?”

“Lord Clarges, I-I came to beg a favor of you,” she said, so nervous she trembled with the force of it. “I need a moment alone with your husband, and you are always so kind to me.”

“May I ask why you should make such a request, Abigail?” Will asked, her agitation lifting the fine hairs on his nape.

“I-I mean, you... know,” she said, a soft, brittle laugh escaping her. Her fingers clenched and unclenched in her apron. “I mean... he purchased that hat for me, and you’ve been talking to my mother—”

Will said, rapidly growing uncomfortable. “Hannibal had nothing to do with it.”

“Abigail, I purchased that hat for your because I find you a bright, pleasant girl and wanted to do something kind for you,” Will said, her cheeks flushed with bright color and her mouth trembling. “No! You’re lying! I knew you would be jealous!”

“Abigail, you aren’t making any sense—”

“Jealous? Abigail!” Will said, and the tone of his voice brought Winston to his feet, suddenly alert. “Abigail, please! What are you talking about?”

“You’re jealous because I came first!” she said, her freckled cheeks flushed with bright color and her mouth trembling. Tears stood in her wide blue eyes and thickened her voice. Will could feel her fear, her uncertainty, could practically taste the desperation in her, the terror that her course of action was for all the wrong reasons and she would rather die before admitting it—a child’s devotion to their beliefs, the reckless tendency of youth to wager everything on a single play. “You can’t stop me, you know. I’m going to tell him no matter what!”

“Abigail, you aren’t making any sense—”

“I’m telling Lord Clarges that he’s my father!” she said, the words breathless, as if she had shocked herself. Her chin tilted up when Will only stared at her, aghast, and she said again with wavering force, “I’m telling Lord Clarges that he’s my father!”

“Abigail, wait!” Will said, but she was gone in a trice, fleeing like a doe before the hunter’s dart.

Will hastily put Winston on his lead before following after her, not wishing anyone to be hurt over a misunderstanding and certainly not wanting Winston to bite in their shared agitation. He heard her barrel through the kitchen and out of the servants’ entrance, Cook’s indignant shouting broken by the slamming of the door.

“Abigail!” he called, relieved that she hadn’t gone into the woods. “Abigail, wait! It isn’t safe!”
The crew was already hard at work under Mr. Wells’ watchful eye, but they exchanged looks and one of them piped up, “She’s safe enough on the path, m’Lord.”

Will watched her go, feeling helpless as he lost sight of her. Seven other girls just like her had vanished into thin air, he knew, and hoped the bright daylight and being on the path was enough to keep her safe.

“My Lord? You seem perturbed,” Mr. Thatcher said, wobbling out onto stoop, not venturing onto the gravel, which was dangerous to unsteady feet.

“I am incredibly perturbed, Mr. Thatcher,” Will said, shushing Winston when he began to bark. “I fear that my attempts at kindness have only resulted in hurt feelings.”

Mr. Thatcher nodded, though Will rather doubted he’d heard.

“Her mother will see to her,” the old butler said, proving Will wrong on that count. “Miss Hobbs has been dreadfully unhappy for nearly a year now, m’Lord. It's frightening not having a place to belong and to find you aren’t who you've always been told you are.”

Will flinched, knowing well enough how that felt.

“Do you know where Abigail came from, Mr. Thatcher?” Will asked, his gaze imploring.

“I cannot remember, my Lord, time passing as it does,” Mr. Thatcher said, his wrinkled face puckering in thought. “The Hobbs never did say, just one day they had a little girl no one knew anything of.”

“But there were rumors,” Will confirmed, wanting to get to the heart of this issue.

“There are always rumors, my Lord,” Mr. Thatcher said, the disapproval heavy in his voice. “Some more believable than others.”

“What rumors?” Will asked, nerves sharpening his voice.

Mr. Thatcher mulled it over, then shook his head. “Nary a one, my Lord.”

Will’s anxiety made room for puzzlement. “Where on earth did she get such a wild idea?”

“My Lord?” Mr. Thatcher asked, genuinely not hearing him this time. He looked very worried, however, when Will headed towards the lane with Winston at his side. “My Lord, where are you going?”

“To get some answers,” Will said, striding away from Marsham Heath with purpose, so intent on his goal that no one dared stop him. Even Magistrate Crawford’s young officer seemed hesitant to approach him, and opted to follow the troubled, unhappy Omega from a safe distance as he headed down towards Moseley in search of the truth.

Chapter 32

Will stalked down the lane with purpose, Winston and his guard at his heels. His mouth was set with grim determination, his blue eyes narrowed behind the shield of his spectacles. He was as much worried for Abigail’s state of mind as he was for her safety, and felt his indignation rise that she would have been deceived so cruelly.

Someone somewhere along the line had brought Abigail to believe she was Hannibal’s daughter, either to reassure her or to mislead her. Either way, he was going to get to the bottom of it before things could go any further. Telling stories to entertain was one thing, but deliberately misleading a child was something he could not bear, nor tolerate.

There was no sign of Abigail on the trail along the way. The smokehouse was pouring its acrid, unpleasant scent into the air as Will approached the Hobbs’ house. He idly noted it in passing, cataloging the fact that Mr. Hobbs must have been successful in that aspect, at least.

He could hear shouting ahead, Abigail’s voice raised in hysterical denials, and quickened his pace in concern, his guard calling a nervous warning after him.

Before he could reach the cottage, the door opened and Mrs. Hobbs emerged, the beautiful little hat box in hand, her face pinched and drawn. She caught sight of Will and paled, if such a thing was possible given her current state.

“Mrs. Hobbs,” he called, thrusting Winston’s lead at the guard, who fumbled to take it, leaving Will to move ahead. “Louise! There is something I need to speak to you about.”
“Please, my Lord, just take it and go,” she said, wretched pleading in her voice as she hurried towards him. She sounded teary and disturbed, her blue eyes darting around in expectation of interruption. She held the box out at arm’s length, a vain attempt to keep him at bay. “She’s beside herself! She’s not thinking clearly!”

“Mrs. Hobbs, Abigail seems to believe something that is patently untrue,” Will said, and waved an impatient hand at the young officer to halt him in his tracks. He lowered his voice and moved closer to Mrs. Hobbs, saying, “Who told Abigail she is my husband’s daughter?”

“Please, my Lord,” she said, trembling. “Please, let it lie!”

“Mrs. Hobbs,” Will said, unable to repress his Gift in the face of her distress. “Louise, I cannot help you if you will not tell me what has been said! Your daughter’s happiness is at stake. If you believe for one moment that I have any ill designs on Abigail—”

“Please, don’t!” she cried, and covered her mouth, appalled at herself. When she spoke again, her voice was small and broken on tears as she said, “We only did as we had to, my Lord. Please, I don’t expect you to understand or forgive us, but what choice did we have?”

Will stared at her, incredulity filling his blue eyes. “What are you saying?” he breathed.

“We only wanted a baby,” she said, a sob overtaking her. “What were we to do? And there she was, perfect and pretty as you please. What were we to do?”

“Mrs. Hobbs—”

They were interrupted by the appearance of Mr. Hobbs in the cottage doorway, thunderous and scowling. The rancid scent of him hit Will like a slap. He came towards them rapidly, anger etching every line of his tense body even down to his clenched fists.

“We took her,” Mrs. Hobbs whispered, her blue eyes filled with despair but the confession forced from her, as if some deep part of her soul longed for absolution she could only find in Will’s shocked stare. “He didn’t want her anyway, did he? Not then, sending her off from the House as he did! Miriam handed her to me, and gave back the other. We meant no harm, all I wanted was my daughter—”

“You have no business here!” Mr. Hobbs shouted, and the officer scurried to intercept him, alarmed by his shouting. But Mr. Hobbs only had eyes for Will, eyes filled with fear and contempt.

“Go,” Mrs. Hobbs said, pushing the hat box against his chest, forcing Will to clutch it to him lest it fall to the ground, “I beg you—I beg you—not to deal harshly with us! I only wanted to reassure her! He wouldn’t want her after all this time, would he? Not our Abigail!”

“You’ll not take her from me!” Mr. Hobbs roared, barely noticing Winston snarling and barking, nor taking heed of the officer's warnings. He stared at Will, the darkness seeping out of him like the cloying scent of decay. “She’s mine, you hear? She’s my daughter! You’ve no right to come here, filling her head with fairy tales! Giving her gifts she doesn’t need!”

“Mr. Hobbs! I must insist you go inside!” the officer shouted, handing Winston’s lead back to Will in order to step into Mr. Hobbs’ path. Mrs. Hobbs, too, was trying to soothe him, casting sorrowful, anxious glances back at Will.

“You can’t have her!” Hobbs snarled, and Will flinched from the Alpha roar in his voice, from the madness breaking against him like a wave on stones. “She’s mine!”

Will drew Winston’s lead through his hand, shortening it to keep the furious dog close to his side. With one final, unhappy look at the chaos before him, he took firm hold of the hat box, turned on his heel, and strode back towards Marsham Heath.

“I’ll report this, m’Lord—”

“Don’t do that,” Will said, cutting the officer off as he caught up, his worry subsiding to confusion. “This is a private family matter. Magistrate Crawford has no reason to involve himself.”

“But Miss Abbie was crying, my Lord,” the young man said, and Will paused to assess him, seeing the worry on his face and the way his eyes flicked back towards the cottage, stricken.

“Constable,” Will said, noting how he straightened his posture when his title was used. “I would prefer you didn’t get Magistrate Crawford involved. You are free to call on the Hobbs family and see for yourself how she fares, but I would appreciate it if you would tell me on your return.”

There was a moment of hesitance before the young officer said, “I’ll see you up to Marsham first, m’Lord, and report back.”
“Thank you,” Will said, grim as he made his way back up to the house and wondering just what on earth he was going to tell his husband when Hannibal finally returned.

Happily oblivious of what happened back at Marsham Heath, Hannibal made it to the Capital in record time, appealing in person to the police force for detectives to assist Magistrate Crawford and finding Zeller’s report waiting for him with Mr. Buddish. Mr. Tier had arrived and was already on the hunt, and Zeller had returned to Hartford to assist with locating Matthew Brown. The letter Francis had brought to Will on his arrival had been traced back to the livery, according to witnesses who recalled one of the little lads speaking with Mina’s intimidating Alpha servant, which pointed directly at Matthew. Much too obviously, in Hannibal’s opinion, but he would take up that issue when it rose.

There were no other leads, no rumbling in Hartford Town about newcomers or anyone suspicious. Mr. Hawkes and Mrs. Henderson had thoroughly questioned the staff, none of whom had any recollection of intruders or anyone carrying out clandestine affairs even between them, let alone with someone from outside the house itself. The strap from Will’s saddle was nowhere to be found, no doubt destroyed by Matthew the moment he finished planting doubt in Will’s mind.

The reason still escaped Hannibal and left him uneasy. In six years of knowing Will, Mr. Brown had been given every opportunity to speak out against Hannibal and stoke the fire of dislike between them. His sudden involvement seemed, as Will had suggested, more a diversion than the truth.

It kept him pensive through his scheduled appointments and the process of referrals. Regardless of what Will decided, Hannibal knew he could never return to the life he’d lived here in the Capital. Now that he had lived with Will and tasted what life with him truly meant, there would never be any going back. His life had developed a distinctive border—before Will, and after him. Having crossed it, what he had left behind could never compare.

He felt the pull of family, the need to spend more time with those he loved and who loved him in return, starting with Will. He would either return to practice as Hartford’s physician or not at all, and did as much as he could to put his affairs in order for now until Will spoke of their future.

That was not his only mission, however, and the more pleasant reason for his trip was the one he took far more delight in. The tailors were more than happy to see him again, even more so when he informed them he was not here on his own behalf, but to gain a copy of Will’s measurements and order more clothing for him.

Being at the height of their trade, they of course showed him through to the Omegan section of their store once he was finished on the men’s side. Hannibal’s presence was welcomed by three gorgeously-dressed Omegas who were delighted to advise him, along with a thronging shop full of curious customers who were very quickly shown the door for his convenience.

He was shown styles of coats, colors and fabrics, different types of habits and waistcoats, breeches and stockings—all manner of things a man could ask for on behalf of his spouse. Making it a point to be a one-stop journey, they carried undergarments, garters, even some styles of shoes they could order out for. Hannibal realized at some point that Will was going to flatten him with something heavy for this, but he rather hoped it would be his delightfully solid body instead of another marquetry table. He ordered the latest fashions, all manner of jackets and long waistcoats, ruffled blouses, plain blouses, the long dress-like outfits with the short breeches, every manner of stockings they had and every type of garter and corset. Nightclothes, day dress, formal wear, riding wear, hats, gloves, handkerchiefs—if they had it, he ordered it to be made to Will’s measurements.

“On the matter of underthings, my Lord,” they broached, a unified front of determination as they urged him into the back room behind closed curtains.

Hannibal saw the mannequin on display in the little alcove and was rendered speechless for a moment by the delicate configuration of watered silk and fine lace it wore. His mind very forcefully provided him with an image of Will wearing it and he cleared his throat, managing, “No, my dears, I fear for my safety if my husband should wear anything such.”

There was a soft murmur of laughter and an exchange of amused glances.

“It is the most recent addition to the lingerie line from the Continent,” he was told, and one of them—Nichola, he thought, though the three were so identical in appearance he had difficulty telling them apart—moved to slip their fingers beneath the stretch of fabric at the mannequin’s hip. The pink of their skin was visible through the nearly-transparent silk and had the
desired effect of firing his imagination all over again. “Most of our clients prefer this beneath instead of drawers, and it supports down below as well as up here.”

One lacquered finger lifted to the chest area, where another panel of silk waited, edged in soft lace and becomingly ribboned.

“He is already a menace to my rational thought,” Hannibal told them, finding it was suddenly very hot in their shop. “I’m afraid I might expire.”

“Then should we move on to more conventional things?”

They did, and he ordered the usual small, fine underclothes that he knew Will was used to, though his thoughts kept drifting back to that silk and lace bodysuit.

He was settling his order, including a traditionally-female riding habit and accompanying hat, when Nichola said, “Then I suppose this will be all for you, my Lord? Unless, of course, you’ve changed your mind about the undergarments?”

Hannibal blinked, momentarily unavailable as his mind erected a palace to Will and added that dangerous item of clothing to it.

“How many colors does it come in?”

“Five so far, my Lord,” Nichola informed him, a slight smile on their lips.

“Give me two of each,” Hannibal said, resigning himself to certain death. “And a standing order for the others as they become available, should he want them.”

“Your spouse is very lucky to have you, my Lord,” Nichola said, adding the request to his order.

“On the contrary,” Hannibal said, thinking of Will in all his surly glory and delighted smiles and sharp wit, “I am beyond lucky to have him.”

The ordering of such vast wardrobe necessitated practical action to make room for it and he had Mr. Buddish send off a letter of request to the Carpenters’ Guild in Hartford as well as to Grandfather, warning that the Lady’s Maid’s room in the Duchess suite was about to find itself transformed. He ordered a new bathtub while he was at it, a large and graceful thing twice the size of the one in their washroom presently, and saw it on its way to be installed before he moved along the Row to acquire other gifts for his spouse, including placing his orders at Gideon’s and Garnets. He had missed enough birthdays and wedding anniversaries that he could excuse any amount of excess, and could have spent the rest of his day happily ordering everything under the sun in the hopes Will would take pleasure in it.

But he ached to set eyes on his little mate and found himself riding back to Marsham in all haste before tea time, eager to be reunited with his husband.

The yard was a mess of digging and deep trenches, and there seemed to be some consternation that the gas line from Moseley was not where the city plans claimed it was, if he heard correctly as he rode up. Hannibal caught sight of Will in the middle of it all, his jacket and neckerchief discarded, his spectacles sliding down the tip of his snub nose as he pointed at the plans. There was a florid suck mark on his delicate throat, bared by his loosened collar. When Hannibal saw it, a pleased, possessive purr escaped him. It was a noise he never dreamed he’d make in his life, but it felt right and natural, and he didn’t begrudge himself.

What he did not see, however, was the Magistrate’s man. A quick glance showed him the guard was nowhere in sight, much to his consternation.

Winston dashed up to Hannibal’s side, jumping and barking despite the horse’s warning neigh. He dismounted and roughed the dog’s jowls, saying, “There’s a good boy. Have you taken good care of Will for me? At least I can rely on you.”

Will spied him there and abruptly walked away from Mr. Wells and the workers, an expression of such bleak foreboding on his face that Hannibal’s smile faltered.

“What is it? What’s happened? Where is your guard?”

Winston dashed about between them, excited to have his two people in close proximity once again, unaffected by the rising tension.
“There’s something we need to talk about, Hannibal,” Will said, so somber and grim Hannibal had the sickening, dizzying realization it had nothing to do with the missing guard, but with himself. In the split second between heartbeats all he could think was that this was it.

Will was going to tell him he’d decided.
Will was going to ask him to leave after all.

“Hannibal?” Will said, brows drawing together in concern when his husband suddenly went entirely still, a bronzed statue with his godlike face drawn in tight planes of pain.

Will reached out impulsively when his bond lurched, the sinking feeling in his stomach testament to Hannibal’s wrenching distress. He took Hannibal’s hand in his, even dirty as he was, squeezing his fingers through the fine leather of his riding gloves.

“Hannibal?” he said again, finding a glimmer of response in those distant amber eyes. He nearly fell prey to the urge to wrap his arms around Hannibal and could not deceive himself into believing it was his Omegan instincts or his improper bond, though he was not ready to consider the truth of what it actually was.

“I’m sorry,” Hannibal said, realizing he had inadvertently alarmed his young mate, whose gentle touch was a soothing balm like no other. “You were so serious when you called out to me, and looked so deeply unhappy, I feared for a moment my absence had decided you.”

“Decided m—no, Hannibal,” Will said, squeezing him again in sympathy, the tight grip of his fingers betraying his own horror at such a suggestion. “Even should it have, I would never give you my answer in such a way. I apologize for worrying you.”

Hannibal’s relief was so vast Will was overcome for a moment, the sudden change bringing with it the realization of how profoundly his decision affected his husband. He could no more kiss him in that moment than he could embrace him, out in the middle of the day as they were with a yard full of curious workers, but he wished he could. He had to content himself with squeezing his fingers firmly around his husband’s and offering him a small smile, which Hannibal returned to him.

“If I seem very uneasy,” he said, marveling how the tense irritation that had plagued him through the day could vanish so quickly with Hannibal’s return, “it is only because I have once more met Mr. Hobbs and been told some very troubling things I cannot make sense of.”

“Has he threatened you?” Hannibal asked, protective ire rising at the mention of the Alpha he had yet to set eyes on. “I should never have gone without you! Must I tie you to my side to keep you safe?”

“That wouldn’t go well for you,” Will warned, a tired smirk curving the corner of his mouth and one disapproving eyebrow hiking over his blue eye at the suggestion.

“Well though I know it,” Hannibal sighed, though he wished he could tie Will to his side if it would guarantee of his safety. “But where is your guard?”

“I asked him to check in on the Hobbs family for me again,” Will admitted. “I know he was to stay with me, but I’ve been worried about Abigail all day.”

“Will, I readily admit that your intentions are admirable, but it is your life I care about,” Hannibal said, his disapproval evident in the set of his mouth. “Perhaps I really should paddle you! And you have been threatened—”

“My guard was with me then, Hannibal, and I was not threatened,” Will said, still deeply disturbed when he thought back on what had happened. “Warning would be a better word for it, and you have better things to do with my backside than paddle it.”

It bought him a moment of surprised silence and worked to jostle Hannibal out of his irritation, though he was no more happy with the situation.

“What do you mean by warned?” Hannibal asked, firmly putting Will’s bottom out of his mind, paddling included.

“Have you, by any chance, spoken to your grandfather of Melinda’s daughter?” Will asked.

Hannibal searched his face, confusion evident in his own features at the sudden change of subject, but answered all the same, “Some, right after your fall. He said he had arranged for her to live with landed gentry and assumed she was doing well, with the suggestion I should assume the same.”

Will’s blue eyes shuttered, a familiar expression of absorbed consideration falling over his face.
“Will?” Hannibal asked, tugging him a step closer by his hand, his voice lowering to a whisper. “Why would you ask me such? What did Hobbs say to you?”

“Grandfather never mentioned how he sent her away?” Will asked, frowning. “Did you know a woman named Miriam, Hannibal?”

“Not that I recall,” Hannibal said, thoroughly confused. “Will—”

“Lord Clarges!”

The shout startled all of them and Winston began to bark, agitated.

They both turned, their discussion derailed by the sight of Magistrate Crawford riding up from Moseley as fast as his harassed-looking horse could carry him.

“I am very glad you're here, Lord Clarges. There's something you need to see,” Jack called, dismounting. One of the house boys scampered out to take the reins of both horses, pulling the snorting animals away from the nervous dog and even more anxious people.

“You've found one of the children, haven't you?” Will guessed, bending to quiet Winston and rub his thick ears, as much to comfort himself as the dog, though Hannibal's fingers laced around his other hand were calming all on their own.

“Please,” Jack said, spine straight and shoulders squared, his gaze direct but serious, “you'd best see for yourself.”

Troubled, Hannibal released Will’s hand with a final squeeze and moved along with him when Jack stalked away. “You needn’t come, Will, if you’d rather.”

“No, everything is in hand here,” Will said, and patted Winston, who responded to such a plethora of commands Will suspected he had once been a treasured companion. He took the dog’s furry head in his hands and firmly told him, “Stay here, Winston. No running off or it’s the bath for you again.”

The dog watched them go, ears perked and eyes anxious, but he obeyed in the end. One evening on his own in the forest had worked a miracle on the intelligent dog, Will had found. He stayed put even as they vanished into the woods at the edge of town.

“I was just explaining things to the detectives you sent, Lord Clarges,” Jack said, taking a trail that led back towards Marsham Heath, but deeper into the woods, “when I was called out for an emergency.”

“I cannot imagine what sort of emergency could occur way out here,” Hannibal said, uneasy to see how close they were to Marsham, even if it was in the woods.

“This sort,” Jack said. He gestured before him in offering and Hannibal peered ahead, for a blessed moment unable to make sense of what he was seeing.

The emergency that Magistrate Crawford had been called away to witness was the discovery of a body, a weathered head atop a stack of hands and feet placed precisely in a configuration that defied understanding.

“Good gods,” Hannibal breathed, fishing out his handkerchief to cover his nose, Will following his lead. The wind turned and the scent of decay became overpowering, a ripe and rotten stench that almost made Will gag. It seemed to linger in his throat, strong enough to taste. He closed his eyes for a long moment, only to snap them open with affront when Jack bluntly asked Hannibal, “Are you sure he should be here, Lord Clarges?”

“Of course he can be here,” Will said, deliberately misunderstanding him. “Hannibal was a doctor during his time away at war. A sight such as this will hardly rattle him.”

Hannibal dropped his handkerchief and opened his mouth to speak, only to wisely close it again. He contented himself to nod in agreement, his somber expression firmly fixed in place to conceal his impressed awe with Will’s sass.

Jack frowned but took Will's response in stride, not in the least bit perturbed by it.

“Do you recognize this person?” Will asked, the stench forgotten as his Gift began to engage in the details. Even decaying and left at the mercy of the elements, the face was clearly feminine, or Omegan, one. There was no hair to be seen, either shorn before the head had been placed or else lost to the wind and small nesting creatures. “This is one of the missing girls, isn’t it?”

“We can’t be positive, but yes, it might be Daphne Woodward. There was an amulet with the body; it was one she always wore. Her mother gave it to her for protection,” Jack said, and boomed at his men as they arrived, “Don’t step on anything.”

Hannibal winced at his volume but Will hardly noticed it. Instead, he said, “I need to have a closer look, Hannibal.”
“Perhaps you shouldn’t see the body up close, my Lord,” Magistrate Crawford said, unease wrinkling the corners of his mouth.

“Nonsense,” Hannibal said, bristling. “If he says he needs to see it, then allow him to look.”

“It might shock him—”

“He has no deficit of hearing or mind, Magistrate, that you cannot reason with him directly,” Hannibal informed him, growing aggravated on Will’s behalf. “Though I wish you the best of luck!”

Will’s fingers briefly brushed his forearm and his tension evaporated. Hannibal took a deep breath and held his tongue, knowing well enough Will was more than capable of defending himself.

“Magistrate Crawford, if I see the body it may help me understand what happened to her,” Will said, grim but determined. “Please, it is not morbid curiosity that compels me, and I have a hearty constitution.”

Jack was not happy nor settled, but grudgingly moved aside, allowing Will closer inspection of Miss Daphne Woodward. Rather, what was left of her.

Will crouched and adjusted his spectacles, taking a moment to compose himself as he did so. It was difficult, but he made himself look. As terrible as it was to see a human reduced to such horror, he looked for her sake in the hopes that the pieces would come together for him in this as they did for him in so many other ways. She deserved to have her last moments understood. She deserved to have justice, this child ripped from her family’s arms and left in the woods like a pile of refuse.

‘Parts that can’t be used...’ The thought coalesced and Will frowned, his mind skipping to what purpose a human might be put to.

It was, unfortunately, varied and unwholesome to an extreme.

“...wild animals, of course...”

Will hardly heard Jack Crawford’s explanation of what he saw. He stared down at her body and could feel the dark, twining presence of something unspeakable taking shape, a rabid beast crouching over this unfortunate child with ill intent.

“I am given to understand that large predators are unheard of in these woods,” Will said, straightening and stepping away, half of him still turned inward to inspect what he had seen. “How has the hunting been?”

Jack looked at Hannibal, who cocked his head in clear warning not to seek his approval.

“Lean,” Jack said. “The farmers are slaughtering twice what they usually do. The take was poor this year from the fields and it’s been difficult to supplement with small game. Even the poachers are coming up empty-handed. Hunters are ranging farther afield, probably how they ended up here.”

“That was how the body was discovered?” Will asked, shuttering his observation to the back of his mind. “Someone hunting on the grounds?”

“I didn’t ask and he didn’t tell,” Magistrate Crawford said. “Considering what was found, we have bigger problems on our hands. Why do you ask?”

“I’m not certain enough to say,” Will said, swallowing hard, disliking the flavor of the thoughts he was entertaining. He was unsure of what he had gleaned and needed to let the details take shape. “This person... he’s... What he’s doing to them, he’s showing you all that this girl—these girls, if this is indeed a pattern—are his. They belong to him and it’s important everyone knows it.”

“You think we’ll find all of them this way?” Jack asked, quietly furious. “You think every missing girl was left in the woods somewhere?”

“She is one of the many taken who matches the description,” Hannibal reminded him, watching Will with a wary eye as he’d suddenly gone quite pale. “It stands to reason that they are out here, somewhere, all of them. And once one is placed, he would be compelled to find another to fill the void she left.”

“If they’re his, then why abandon their heads, hands, and feet?” Magistrate Crawford mused, referencing the sad remnants of what had been a young lady, her potential reduced to nothing at the desire of a mad, mad man.

“I suppose that depends on his purpose,” Hannibal murmured. “And where else he might be finding these children.”

“He won’t have hunted outside of the village,” Will said, his voice strengthening, a familiar expression of impatience on his lovely face as his brow furrowed in a frown.

“You think he has a specific grudge against the girls of this village?” Jack asked.
“Some of them, yes, clearly,” Will said, his response short and abrupt and indicative of deep thought. To his credit, Jack didn’t so much as bat an eyelash at Will’s curt way of speaking. Indeed, he seemed relieved by it. “Perhaps one of them gave him offense or rebuffed his advances? Whoever he is, he is familiar enough with Moseley and these children to get them alone, either through coaxing or timing. I just... There’s something I’m missing about this.”

Jack looked askance at Hannibal, his expression turning guarded and stony. Cautiously, he said, “We’re all missing something, here. The real reason he’s taking these children.”

“These girls aren’t the one he wants,” Will said, looking at the body again, detached this time, trying to separate himself from the voracious need that had swallowed her nearly whole. “What would you do, Magistrate Crawford, with something you treasured and wanted to keep?”

“Protect it,” was the unhesitating response.

“You certainly wouldn’t discard it in a pile in the middle of the woods,” Hannibal said, watching Will’s growing agitation. “Having taken what you wanted from it.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Will said, a tremor overtaking him. He wet his lips, the gesture nervous but all he could do when faced with what his thoughts were offering him.

“If you can help us, my Lords, then whatever you think, no matter how outlandish, you have to speak it. Daphne Woodward was only sixteen when she was taken,” Jack said, the word dropping from his lips, rounded with disapproval. “I find it difficult to imagine what kind of monster could hurt a child.”

“It isn’t as difficult to imagine as one could wish,” Will murmured, brows drawing together. He entirely missed Jack’s sideways glance at him.

“My spouse has a gifted imagination,” Hannibal said, feeling the need to say something before Jack made his own assumptions. “His perception is, at times, uncanny.”

“The gift of imagination,” Jack mused, cocking his head as he looked at Will. “If only I could borrow your imagination, Lord Clarges.”

“Count yourself lucky that you cannot, Magistrate Crawford,” Will said, somber and quiet as he looked back down at the remains. “It is a more a burden than a gift, in the end.”

“I would carry it in a heartbeat, Lord Clarges, if it would save even one of these girls,” Jack said, fixing Will with a steady stare filled with such insistence Hannibal stepped between them, breaking his line of sight.

“I think we’ve done all we can here, Jack,” Hannibal said, reaching back to brush Will’s arm and urge him to move. “Please, keep us informed. And if you find more bodies, you will let us know?”

“I certainly will,” Jack said, his frown ferocious. “And I’m afraid you’ll be seeing more of me quite soon, Lord Clarges.”

Will was silent and pensive on their way back to Marsham, enough so that Hannibal broached the subject by saying, “I know I have remarked on it before, Will, but I do find your perception truly uncanny.”

“Not uncanny enough to be of any assistance,” he said, frustrated. He pushed his spectacles up on his snub nose, huffing out a frustrated breath. “It’s as if there is a shadow before me, fluttering like a cobweb at twilight, barely seen but felt.”

Hannibal frowned, considering Will’s words. “You are aware you have more pieces of this puzzle than you think, and it frustrates you.”

Will chuckled, an unhappy rasp of sound as out of place on such a beautiful day as the horror they’d left behind them. “Having pieces of any particular puzzle has never been a problem for me, Hannibal. Ever since I was a child, I have always known more than I should, felt more than I should, as if every person I laid eyes on was someone I had known a lifetime.”

Hannibal angled a curious look his way, wondering at his meaning. “That must have been very troubling for you, especially as a child.”

“It was,” Will said, his nerves still making his speech abrupt. “I had no understanding of it and only knew what my father taught me, which was that my habit, as he called it, was disturbing to those around me and made me even more unusual than I already was.”
Hannibal’s sharp Alpha fangs flashed in a sudden, soundless snarl at that. “Your father had no right or reason to coerce you into believing you are anything other than what you are.”

“And what is that?” Will asked, turning to look at him. His composure was paper thin to Hannibal’s trained eye, so thin he wondered how it had ever fooled him. Beneath the surface of this grim, abrupt young man was someone who had just looked at the pitiful remnants of a human life and drawn conclusions which even Hannibal was surprised by.

Will cocked his head at Hannibal’s long assessment of him, and asked, “How do you see me, Hannibal?”

Hannibal didn’t speak at first, but when he did, the respect and pride was evident in his resonant Alpha voice as he said, “I see you as you are, Will, brilliant, beautiful, intriguing... and dangerous.”

Will was taken aback by that summation, the ordering not lost on him.

“You’re the Wolf amidst the sheep, Will,” Hannibal purred, bringing a flush of color to Will’s cheeks. “Unpredictable and entirely Uncommon.”

Hannibal’s comparison pleased him enough to bring a genuine smile to his full lips. He looped his arm through his husband’s and said, “That is a great improvement from last time, Hannibal.”

“And far fewer teacups destroyed because of it,” Hannibal said, covering Will’s dirty hand with his own. “Whatever it is, Will, whatever this gift of yours is trying to tell you, you’ll find it.”

“Your faith in me is unjustified, I fear.”

“Not in the least,” Hannibal said, grinning. “If there is one thing above all others you excel at, Will Lecter-Graham, it’s surprising people.”

He looked over at his beautiful mate, whose eyes deigned to be a vivid blue this afternoon, bright but heavy with thoughts behind the shield of his spectacles.

“And I, for one, am always delighted by a surprise.”

“Then I have another for you,” Will said, fiddling with his glasses in a rare show of nerves. He drew a deep breath and released it, saying, “Abigail Hobbs confronted me moments after you left this morning. She begged me to request a moment of your time for her. She was quite determined, Hannibal. She seems to be under the impression that you’re her father and she wanted to tell you so.”

Hannibal’s brows drew down in confusion and he shook his head. After a long moment of baffled silence, he managed, “I can honestly say that did surprise me.”

“I could find no graceful way to warn you,” Will lamented. “I am sorry, Hannibal. It was quite shocking for me to hear. It must be doubly so for you.”

“Why on earth should she think such a thing?” Hannibal asked, mystified. “And why would she approach you?”

“She thought you had purchased the hat,” Will admitted, wishing there was some other way to confess what had happened, to soften it somehow. “She assumed or hoped or wished it was a gift from a father to his daughter. Someone has made her believe she is your child, Hannibal. And I believe that person to be Louise Hobbs herself.”

“That makes no sense,” Hannibal said, his voice taking on an Alpha growl that spoke of his unease. “Where would anyone get the idea I have a child loose in the world?”

“That’s why I went back to their cottage, so I could ask that very same thing,” Will said, the two of them stopping on the trail just before the mess of the yard. Winston caught sight of them and approached slowly, uncertain if he was allowed, his tail waving like mad when Will gestured at him to come. “Mrs. Hobbs stopped me before I reached their home. She gave me back the hat and begged me not to deal harshly with them. She said, ‘He didn’t want her anyway, not sending her off from the House as he did.’ She also said a person named Miriam handed Abigail to her and put another baby back in Abigail’s place.”

Hannibal’s amber eyes were cast down to one side, his thoughts running riot. They rose to meet Will’s with the shadow of a flinch. “Is that why you were asking about Melinda’s daughter?”

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“It was all I could think of,” Will said, frustrated by how little he knew. “I thought perhaps it had something to do with her. I would never have pried otherwise, but you have no children and the only one which could be mistaken for yours would be Melinda’s daughter.”

“No one knew about Melinda’s pregnancy,” Hannibal said, deeply troubled. “She kept to her room the entirety of her stay at Hartford House and there was no labor to betray her state.”
“I should like to speak with Louise in person with you present,” Will said, leaning over to pet Winston in an absent gesture of affection. “Perhaps we might summon her to Marsham Heath?”

“In the middle of all this ruckus?” Hannibal asked, touching his tongue to his lower lip, his Alpha fangs briefly visible. “It might be better to speak with her in her home.”

“I would prefer to do so in a place where her husband is not present,” Will said. “He grew violently upset when he saw me, Hannibal, and it was not solely my being Omegan that upset him. He was terrified I had come to steal Abigail away. Whatever they have done, however they came to be Abigail’s parents, they did so in a way that has them both very frightened that we intend to take her.”

“Frightened people are dangerous,” Hannibal murmured. He shifted to grasp Will’s dirty hand in his and kiss his knuckles, tasting the sweetness of his skin beneath the loamy earth of Marsham Heath. “I am very glad you had someone with you, Will. And Hobbs should be very glad he did not harm you, lest he face the consequences. I will ask Grandfather for the details of those involved with taking Melinda’s daughter to her new family so we may rest our minds on that count.”

“And what if he makes mention of a woman named Miriam?” Will softly inquired, giving him a sympathetic squeeze. “Hannibal, if by some chance Abigail is truly Melinda’s daughter...”

“If Grandfather mentions a Miriam, then we have some warning that Mrs. Hobbs is telling the truth as she sees it and we can forge ahead accordingly,” Hannibal said. “Honestly, I cannot even bear the idea of her being here, Will, under the threat of a murderer lurking in the woods. It goads me to rash actions that would not be fair, not to Abigail or you or myself, should we find out there is no possibility that she is Melinda’s daughter.”

Will nodded, his own impulses mirroring Hannibal’s. “No, that would only cause more hard feelings all around. Abigail is safe with her mother and father and we should not disrupt them for no reason. That is why I had the Constable checking in on them. They were so very distraught, including Abigail.”

Hannibal heaved a deep sigh, drawing on Will’s calm, and said, “We might settle this all very easily if we have Grandfather’s written proof that Melinda’s daughter is elsewhere, if they truly believe that Abigail is her child. But it is very likely that this is nothing more than a misunderstanding, Will. More than one young mother has named a Peer their child’s sire out of desperation or dreams. It may simply be a case of mistaken identity. I cannot tell if that reassures me... or disappoints me.”

“You need to know for certain, Hannibal,” Will said, his voice falling to a coaxing purr. “I think we should find out what happened to Melinda’s daughter and put your mind at ease. Perhaps it will help lay Melinda’s memory to rest if you know her daughter is safe and happy and well.”

Hannibal smiled, a small and sad shadow of his usual easy grin. “You’re right, of course. I should have asked after her long before now. My guilt has stayed me so many times, and created more guilt in doing so. It is desperately difficult to break free of such a circle.”

“I will help you,” Will said, and when Hannibal lifted his amber gaze, Will added with a wry smile, “I am attracted to things which need my help, after all, am I not?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, to have the matter in hand and options available. “It would seem you are, Will.”

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It was not the last surprise of Hannibal’s day, and the next was one he was not delighted by, all things considered. It came in the form of Aunt Margaret arriving via the Earl of Bredon’s coach mere moments after he and Will had gone inside to clean up for tea.

Luckily, Hannibal thought, despairing as she alighted in the trenched and thoroughly dismantled yard of Marsham Heath, the Earl of Bredon himself had not accompanied her.

“What were you saying about surprises again, Hannibal?” Will inquired, grinning when his husband gave him a woeful look. “And no Aunt Grace or Uncle Robert? How shall we get on?”

“My family is best taken in small doses,” Hannibal, casting another glance at the window. Winston yipped, what Will was coming to consider his conversational tone, and Will bent to stroke his ears as Hannibal said, “And I am sure Aunt Margaret will relay everything in details no one will hear since they are all deaf as posts.”
“I’m going upstairs to get presentable,” Will said, chuckling softly at his husband’s summation and straightening to move towards the stairs, Winston at his heels. “When I come down, we’ll handle this together. Your grandfather did say Aunt Margaret would call.”

“Yes, he did, but I expected it would be at Hartford,” Hannibal admitted, heaving a sigh as his aunt loitered on the drive to snoop at what the workers were doing. He turned to call over his shoulder, “We’ll write to Grandfather this evening! Don’t think I’ve forgotten it.”

“One crisis at a time, thank you,” Will said, bounding up the stairs, but not before warning, “Don’t try to climb out any windows without me.”

Hannibal smirked, wryly wishing he could do just that, but Mr. Thatcher finally reached the door and admitted his great-aunt in a cloud of sweet perfume and the floral fragrance unique to the female Alphas of his family line.

It was a scent that put him at ease despite his annoyance, bringing to mind a childhood of comforting hugs and indulgence even as prickly and resistant as he’d been, his Alpha tendencies worsened by the handling he’d received at home. But his family had never ceased to love him, not for a single moment, nor he them.

“Goodness gracious, my dear! What on earth is happening?” Aunt Margaret asked, handing off her hat and shawl to Mr. Thatcher, leaning heavily on her cane. “Are we at war with the pixies?”

“Moles, Aunt Margaret,” Hannibal said, taking up her plump hand.

She angled A Look at him but allowed him to escort her into Marsham Heath’s modest little parlor where the open curtains admitted the strong late afternoon sun.

“You have always been such a vexing boy with that peculiar humor of yours!” she huffed. “You take after my brother in that respect!”

“I take after Grandfather quite a lot, I’ve been told,” Hannibal chuckled, helping her to get settled. “And how is he? He’d written that you dined together.”

“Yes, yes, it was all very lovely,” Aunt Margaret informed him, tapping her cane to emphasize her point and looking suitably dignified. “Roland was in fairly good humor, though I ended up joining him for brandy in order to speak of anything of consequence, as the Lady Rathmore is astonishingly persistent in her attentiveness.”

“He did mention that you were rather pleased she had not been married into the family,” Hannibal remarked, seating himself across from her.

Aunt Margaret craned a look around before saying, “My dear, you could not offer me any amount of money that would entice me to think well of that child! It entirely escapes me how two such dissimilar children can look so frightfully alike!”

“She can be a bit overwhelming,” Hannibal said, amused by his Aunt’s impression.

“Hannibal, the Colosseum at the height of the Season is overwhelming,” Aunt Margaret said, her mouth pinched in a sour frown. “When it comes to one’s patience, Lady Rathmore is a revelation. I can say with complete certainty that you got the better end of that bargain, Hannibal. Will is lovely, just lovely, and so very darling. But where is he?”

“Upstairs making himself presentable,” Hannibal said, and before he could add to that, Aunt Margaret loudly scolded, “Well, I certainly hope you haven’t been tumbling him about on carpets again, Hannibal! It isn’t his fault, you know, that the press made such gossip of him!”

“Aunt Margaret—”

“The Society columns will always blow everything out of proportion,” Aunt Margaret said, tapping her cane to make her point, her rings winking on her plump fingers as she gestured with her other hand. “And Will is certainly not the type to carry on an affair, even with a Prince! No matter that you have treated him with dreadful disregard and he is due a pinch of excitement in his life!”

“Naturally, I—”

“But that is no reason at all to be sequestering him out in this awful place!” Aunt Margaret said, determined to have her say. “Musty, dusty, moldy old horror that it is!”

“Aunt Margaret, if you are quite finished?” Hannibal inquired, waiting until he got a sideways sniff. “Will is upstairs cleaning up because he’s been heading the troops in the yard and he is nothing if not hands-on. I can assure you, there have been no incidents involving carpets.”
Aunt Margaret’s brows rose at his choice in words. He wondered if she could scent Will on him, and did his best not to fidget beneath her assessing gaze.

“But more to the point,” Hannibal said, confident that Mr. Thatcher might have reached the kitchen by now to order tea, “I am very surprised to see you all the way out here.”

“No one is more surprised than me,” Aunt Margaret said. “But you were not at Chelsea House where my dear brother assured me you were in residence! I came to the Capital for the weekend and Mr. Black told me you had whisked your husband off to the countryside!”

“Well, Mr. Black never lets an opportunity pass when it comes to annoying me. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” Hannibal asked, genuinely curious. “Grandfather did warn me that you wanted to speak with me.”

“To you both,” she insisted. “I shall wait until Will joins us and Mr. Thatcher manages some tea. You simply must allow that poor man to retire, Hannibal!”

“I will make arrangements for that very shortly, Aunt Margaret,” Hannibal said. “A cottage in Moseley should suit him quite nicely, don’t you think?”

“Not as nicely as Hartford should suit you,” Aunt Margaret said. “Though I understand why you left so hastily.”

“Grandfather informed you?”

“Yes, Hannibal, he did,” she confirmed. “And it is all very troubling. I have told no one, naturally, as it is not my place to do so, but you are more than welcome to return to the nest, so to speak. Grace and Robert have always had more than ample room for you at Fernhill, my dear, and for your little family as well, should you ever manage one.”

Hannibal cleared his throat and refused to rise to the bait, grateful for the arrival of the footman with the tea service quickly followed by the arrival of his mate, pink from his scrubbing and wearing a smile. His warm, sugary scent teased Hannibal’s nose, stronger now, he was certain of it, and wondered at the cause.

“Aunt Margaret, how good it is to see you,” Will said, moving to clasp her hand in his before settling at Hannibal’s side, Winston nosing Aunt Margaret until she patted him. “I hope you had a comfortable trip.”

“Yes, my dear, thank you,” she said, a pleased smile on her lips as she looked at Will. “You are always so very polite. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate that in a young person these days.”

“Perhaps you might compare his behavior to someone else’s?” Hannibal suggested, smirking around his hastily-lifted teacup when Aunt Margaret glared his way.

“I said that I cannot tell you, Hannibal dear, do try to keep up,” she urged, taking up her own cup as Will did. She waited until the footman had gone before saying, “Now that I have the two of you together, I hardly know where to begin.”

“Given that you have come all the way out here, Aunt Margaret,” Hannibal said, “one might suppose you had ample time to consider your plan of attack before descending on us without notice?”

“The day I wish to be lectured on how to appropriately conduct myself, Hannibal,” Aunt Margaret said, fixing him with a firm look that worked as well on him now as it had when he was in short pants, “I will ask someone respectable, and that someone is not you.”

“Yes, Aunt Margaret,” he said, properly chastened, though Will noted his slight smile.

“What I wish to speak to you about—to both of you about,” she said, serious, “is our troubling family history, which seems to be troubling us still!”

“I wasn’t aware we had a troubling family history,” Hannibal said, settling his cup in his saucer and shifting closer to Will, content to feel the press of his husband’s thigh against his own.

“That is precisely the problem,” Aunt Margaret said, offended. “It came to my attention during my discussion with Roland that neither one of you is aware of what brought our families together.”

“You mean the relationship between our grandfathers?” Will inquired, his tone soft and respectful. “Grandfather does not seem to want to share his history, Aunt Margaret.”

“It isn’t just his to share!” she said. “There is a great deal you don’t know about my brother, and a great deal that might inform you! Did your father ever speak of your grandfather, Will?”
“No, Aunt Margaret,” Will said, putting his teacup down and relaxing at Hannibal’s side, not realizing when his fingers moved to twine with his husband’s on his thigh, his other hand falling to Winston’s head when the dog moved closer to lay his muzzle against Will’s knee. “He never spoke of his father, nor of his mother.”

“Charles was his name, your grandfather,” she said, the severity of her resolve softening in a smile as she recalled him. “He was very handsome, very stately. You look so much like him, Will. My brother must surely delight in being near you.”

Will flushed, pleased but embarrassed, and told her, “He has never mentioned a resemblance to my grandfather.”

“No, of course he wouldn’t, the old fool,” she sighed, abandoning her teacup to sit with one hand lax in her lap and the other clenched on her cane. “My brother has always been very tempestuous. You take after him in so many respects, Hannibal, you always have. When he had just come of age, he met Charles at an art exhibition in the Capital. You must forgive me, children, if I cannot spare your sensibilities, but I must speak plainly.”

“Please do,” Will encouraged her, his curiosity well and truly piqued.

“We would never ask otherwise, Aunt Margaret,” Hannibal added, eager to hear of his grandfather’s past.

“Then I can be honest when I say they were drawn together with an immediacy all around them could feel,” she said, lowering her gaze in thought. “It did not matter to them that they both were Alpha males or that such an attachment could only lead to disappointment.”

Will glanced at Hannibal, finding his own astonishment reflected on his husband’s. The first impulse to consider it outlandish was lost to the understanding that their elders had once been young and passionate, filled to the brim with life and impulses, not all of which brought them the results they hoped for. Yet, even though his imagination had touched on the idea there might have been something more between their grandfathers than friendship, Will had shied away from the possibility Aunt Margaret now stated as fact.

“They saw only one another from the moment their eyes met,” Aunt Margaret told them, “and that, as far as my brother was concerned, was the end of it, even though it caused an ungodly scandal. Charles was a tutor at the time, you see, and a good deal older than Roland, but he was so pleasant, so kind, and so pleasing in every respect all of the best families had welcomed him.”

“I am sure being the heir to an earldom didn’t hurt his prospects,” Hannibal remarked, thumb rubbing Will’s hand as his thoughts churned, not quite as surprised by the revelation as his spouse was.

“He was not the heir,” Aunt Margaret said, looking from one to the other. “Charles was nearly fifty when his second cousin’s unfortunate death resulted in his becoming the Earl of Reddig, and by that time Roland was already spending entire summers as his guest. He and Charles were inseparable by then. Entirely too close for our father’s comfort. A dalliance was acceptable in those days, but there was fear the attachment would keep them both from their duties. Charles, being much older and much wiser, married in due course and went about the business of producing the expected heir. He encouraged Roland to accept our father’s choice for him and settle into his duties to the family.”

Hannibal frowned at the tone of her voice and ventured, “I take it he did not.”

“Naturally, he did not,” Aunt Margaret said, thoroughly disapproving. “He told our father he would rather die a happy pauper than a miserable Duke and did his best to convince Charles to run away with him, the impulsive brat!”

Will flinched, his brows drawing together in concern at what he was hearing. “He did nothing of the sort, did he?”

“Charles always had the temperament of an angel,” Aunt Margaret sighed. “He begged Roland to calm, tried everything he could to caution my brother to restraint, but it only upset Roland all the more. He left us just after his twenty-fifth birthday.”

Somber distance filled her voice as much as it filled her amber eyes, memories from her younger years rising with force enough to render her quiet with their strength.

“He was gone over three years,” she said, turning her rings on her finger absently. “Our father died during that time and none of us knew if Roland was alive or dead. Charles was a great comfort to the family, and somehow he got word to my brother. He’d been traveling the world and went to ground at some point in the far east, Nippon, I believe. I never was clear just where. But he came back most altered.”

“Altered in what way?” Hannibal asked, concerned by how dismayed she seemed, even all these years later.

“It was as if a light had gone out inside of him,” she said, holding Hannibal’s gaze. “He returned not to us, but to Charles, and whatever passed between them they never spoke of. Your father was born by then, Will, a round and healthy little lad with
such a terrible temper. He took after his mother, you know. Oh, it is always such a tragedy when even a woman’s fortune cannot tempt a man to overlook her disposition. It made her quite unpleasant by the time Charles married her, the poor girl. Of course, her husband’s preference for that which he could not have as he wished to have it did nothing to improve the state of their marriage.”

“That is such a terrible result, Aunt Margaret,” Will whispered, re-examining every interaction he’d had with Grandfather, finding clues in his fondness for love long lost. “It is so unfair they were forced apart when it sounds as if they were very much invested in one another.”

“They were not forced apart, my dear,” Aunt Margaret assured him. “It is only that two people with such a strong draw cannot do anything by halves. It was more painful to them to have a partial union than it was to be entirely parted from one another. The Lecter line is still direct, and we have your grandfather to thank for it. Had he not been such an influence on my brother, there is no telling if Roland would ever have settled. He was quite wild ever since I can remember, and ever so frightened of life becoming routine. He raged against it with everything in him. If Roland has ever wanted something, he wanted every bit of it. My brother has always been greedy.”

“I think, when it comes to love, we should all be greedy,” Hannibal said, thinking of his grandfather saying, ‘There are things in the world we love that are too precious, too dear to us to parse down into words, Hannibal...’

“I wish he had been as greedy for his wife as he had been for Charles,” Margaret said, fanning herself, too hardened in life to feel embarrassed to speak of such intimate matters to family, but needing a distraction all the same. “Perhaps she would not have succumbed to her low spirits as she did... but that is neither here nor there! The truth is, their mutual regard lasted throughout their lives, consummated or not! That is why the contract was drawn up. That is why Roland has been so insistent the two of you provide him with a child of united bloodlines. It is selfish and cruel, but it is the ugly truth and here we find ourselves.”

“Why did he not marry my father to one of Lord Reddig’s daughters?” Hannibal inquired, finding it strange that they had waited so long to seek the unification of their separate bloodlines.

“Your father had no more interest in obedience than Roland ever did,” Aunt Margaret said, banging her cane on the floor. “And Roland was twice as strict with him as he ever was with Grace. They were never easy with one another, your father and grandfather. Two Alphas cut from identical cloth makes for a very unhappy household. But even Roland could see how much your father loved Saule. He put his plans in abeyance with the full understanding their eldest son would have a Graham to wife, thus the contract.”

There was a long silence in which all parties digested what had been said. Will poured a second cup of tea for everyone and they drank. Only then did Hannibal venture, “You seemed very anxious to reach us and tell us this story, Aunt Margaret.”

“I am anxious because I never dreamed you were ignorant of how your situation has come about, either one of you,” Margaret said, her hand trembling as she put her cup down “I am anxious because yet again the Lecter line faces defaulting to a side branch because force is being used instead of persuasion. And you, you rascal, have spent nearly seven years sliding out of every ball and escaping every dinner party where we might chance to speak!”

Hannibal had the good grace to flush and lowered his head in contrition.

“I am anxious,” Aunt Margaret said, transferring her attention to Will, who held her gaze with an ache in his heart for the effort she had undertaken for their sake, her love like a small but sturdy anchor pulling them back from the bleak future she feared for them, “because I see before me my brother and the man he loved all over again, only this time parted by ignorance and stubborn pride! I will not see it squandered yet again. I will not sit myself by and watch so much beautiful potential be pruned to the roots and burned from the ground! Not while I can help it!”

Hannibal’s hand clenched in Will’s and he squeezed back, feeling a rush of affection through his bond, the draw of family, the security of those who cared.

How strange it felt to him, like clothing that seemed never to fit quite right until one day it fit perfectly, and you realized it always had. He warmed to the feeling, the vastness of familial bonds something he could grasp in practice now, not only in logic. Should he accept Hannibal, he would also accept the odd and very well-meaning, if somewhat deaf relations, any one of whom would not hesitate to blaze a trail to his doorstep with every intention to help, compelled by such great and limitless
love. And yet his own blood relatives, comfortable in their separate lives, speaking neither to him nor to one another, would find such actions appalling, excessive, shameful.

“Hannibal, your father was very harsh with you,” Margaret said, her voice falling into low disapproval that drew Will from his thoughts. “His resentment of you was a great burden and his conduct was shocking. I have no desire to watch you spiral down into the same black well of unhappiness that hounded my poor nephew to his grave. So I appeal to your good sense in the matter of your marriage. Do not continue to allow the grief and bitterness of your father to dictate your life and prevent you from the happiness you both deserve! Many marriages are made between strangers, children. If friendship can be managed, surely love can grow!”

Hannibal, his hand firmly held in both of Will's own, somberly told her, “We shall take your words to heart, Aunt Margaret.”

“See that you do!” she warned, entirely unaware of the way they sat. “I would hate to think I have come all this way for my good sense and honest concern to be wasted!”

“It will not be wasted, Aunt Margaret,” Will said, pulling Hannibal's hand into his lap to hold it with both of his own. “Hannibal and I will do our very best to make do with our lot.”

“Of course you will, my dear,” Aunt Margaret said, beaming at Will. “You are such a pleasant, darling child! Your quietude reminds me so much of Charles! You are every bit as even in spirit as he ever was and I pray your gentle calm can settle my great-nephew.”

“It seems a monumental task, but I will apply myself with vigor,” Will promised, squeezing Hannibal's hand hard when his husband's amusement threatened to emerge. “And thank you for going to such effort on our behalf. I admit I was curious about the connection between our families. It is both a relief and a great sadness to me to learn more. I wish it could have been otherwise for them, but then neither Hannibal nor I would be here, and I am gladly selfish on that count.”

“Oh, my dearest, sweet child!” Margaret said, pressing her free hand to her heart. “Never imagine for a moment either one of them regretted the results of their necessary actions! They spent a great deal of time together shortly after Hannibal's birth, settling the arrangements and reflecting on their lives. My brother seemed very heartened upon his return and took the news of Charles' passing with peace. Love tends to deal as many wounds as it does wonders, but in the end every sacrifice is worth it, hm?”

“Indeed,” Hannibal said, “but one sacrifice that will never be required is the loss of supper—say you will stay, Aunt Margaret?”

“Heavens no! I have never liked Marsham Heath, my dear!” Aunt Margaret said, uttering a little chuckle. “Goodness, but we were dragged here as children every Season to waste away in this little wooden tomb while our parents cavorted in the Capital!”

“Please, do stay,” Will said. “I would love to hear of Marsham in your youth, Aunt Margaret, and to tell you of the renovations we’re doing.”

“Oh, I do hope your renovations involve a razing of the likes not seen since Alexandria?” she inquired, thoroughly interested in such a process.

“Alas, no, and with far less loss of priceless history, Aunt Margaret,” Hannibal said, chuckling at how crestfallen she looked.

“Another time, perhaps, then, my darling children! I have already accepted an invitation to dine in the Capital and my week is quite full!” Aunt Margaret said. “But there is time to tell me all about the war happening in the yard and about the ball. Remind me to tell you of the time I waltzed with the Czar on the Promenade! It was a masquerade, too, you know! It was quite exciting! Oh, such a fuss his wife made! But I have never been one to refuse a dance, have I?”

She happily chattered on, satisfied she had affected a reunion between them.

Will and Hannibal, hand in hand with Winston snoozing at their feet, were happy enough to allow her to claim the triumph. They sat there together enjoying the comforting feeling of family and all the love, tears, frustrations, and amusement it brought along with it.

Yet beneath their smiles lay thoughts of seven missing young girls, of bodies in the woods, of weeping mothers with secrets refusing to be kept, lurking like a shadow on the landing just waiting to push them all into stifling darkness.
Chapter 33

With the crew finally beginning work and so much to occupy them, life fell into a rhythm. The happiness Will found began to grow, putting down roots that reached deep to take firm hold despite the unwholesome happenings at Marsham Heath. Taking the bitter with the sweet was simply life, he knew, and had tasted enough bitterness to savor what he had.

Abigail did not return to the House. Will's concern in her direction was laid to rest by Magistrate Crawford, who called on the family personally at Hannibal's insistence and due to his own worry for her safety. She was one of very few girls her age in Moseley who matched their killer's preferences and the Magistrate was taking no chances. To all reports, she was abed with low spirits and Mrs. Hobbs was tending her, which had to suffice for them all.

Winston enjoyed Marsham Heath nearly as much as Will did and Hannibal was delighted to see them both thriving under his watchful, cautious eye. His husband was in his glory with so much going on, his experience as land manager earning him the respect of Mr. Wells and the crew in short order. He knew what he was about, which was abundantly clear, and Hannibal couldn't have been more proud of him. The only other thing to cloud their enjoyment was their correspondence, or lack thereof.

Though letters ran like water between the Capital and Marsham Heath, finding their way in from Hannibal's work and for the position of land manager at Hartford, Hannibal's letter to Grandfather regarding Melinda's daughter was met with a protracted silence.

More tellingly, nothing came from Mina at all, though plenty of news about her husband had found its way into Hannibal's hands.

"It does make me worry," Will admitted, skating an exasperated look upstairs when the pounding began again, sending a fine shower of dust down onto their luncheon. "Mr. Buddish's report was quite concerning regarding Timothy's financial situation."

"Yes, it was," Hannibal agreed, one hand protectively over his teacup, though it was no use—with the construction it seemed dust was now a steady part of their diet and simply couldn't be avoided. "It isn't uncommon for a Lord to owe so much to so many, but the reports of just how deep his debt reaches and how little return he is getting on the few holdings he still has... it quite boggles the mind."

"I never dreamed he worked because he needed to," Will murmured, emptying his dusty tea out into his saucer and pouring a fresh cup. He quirked an eyebrow at Hannibal when he slipped Winston a chunk of cold chicken beneath the table, thinking Will didn't see him. "My father was delighted when he began to court Mina. He assumed she would be very well cared for. He could never have imagined that Timothy was set to inherit only a mountain of debt from his father along with his title."

"Your father seems to be wrong quite a lot; we shall avoid his opinion at all costs," Hannibal said, earning himself a wry cock of Will's eyebrows. He grinned, unrepentant, and Will chuckled, done in by his humor.

"Still, it is troubling," Will said, thinking of his sister. "Mina is the most angelic, pleasant person in the world provided she has everything she desires. With their fortunes in such a state, it is no wonder she is put out with her husband. Yet, I see no way we can help with this situation if she will not confide in me."

"Well, there's nothing we can do to compel her," Hannibal said, wiping his hands on his napkin. He changed to a safer subject with, "Shall we see how the yard is faring?"

Will nodded, eager to take a look now that the pipe was laid and things had been put back to rights outside.

"Sorry to interrupt, m'Lords," Mr. Berger said, arriving in a flushed and harried rush. "I thought you might want this straightaway. Mr. Buddish said it came late this morning."

He handed a letter over from Hartford House and Hannibal took it with a jolt of sudden nerves, his eyes meeting Will's.

"Thank you, Mr. Berger," Will said, smiling at the rosy-cheeked valet. "Go downstairs and catch your breath, though I doubt you'll find any peace in the house today."

"Well, an early start makes an early finish, my Lord!" Mr. Berger said, restored to good cheer by a mission well executed. He beamed at them both and took himself off downstairs.

"Why don't we take this," Will said, plucking the letter from Hannibal's fingers, "outside where it's quieter and see what Grandfather has to say?"
“I think that is an excellent idea,” Hannibal agreed, his nerves betraying him in the twitch of his fingers around Will's as they moved outside. “Now that I am faced with answers, I am not sure I am prepared for them.”

“You anticipate unpleasant truths?” Will asked, reclaiming his hand in an attempt to not scandalize the servants. Winston rushed off into the treeline after a squirrel, immune to his Masters’ cares, but keeping an eye on them.

“I cannot find a way for the truth to be pleasant,” Hannibal admitted, hands clasped behind his back and head angled to the canopy of verdant leaves. “Grandfather said he placed her with landed gentry. If she is in residence with them, then I have no right or reason to intrude on her life.”

“And if Mrs. Hobbs is telling the truth? Do you have right or reason to intrude on her life?”

Will did not resist when Hannibal took his hand again, drawing him down to sit on a bench beneath an arbor. It was overrun with sweet-smelling honeysuckle and busy with bees droning about their work.

“I simply do not know,” Hannibal sighed. “But I am borrowing trouble to delay the inevitable.”

He gestured at the letter and Will broke the wax seal, unfolding it with efficient grace.

“Would you like to read it, or shall I?” He asked.

“I would like us to read it together,” Hannibal suggested, uneasy.

They did so, sitting in the shade shoulder to shoulder and anxious at what they might be told.

**Hannibal,**

I regret it has taken me so long to respond to you, but I did not wish to rely on my own memory and required some consultation with those who assisted in the baby's care.

In answer to your question, in the wake of Melinda's unfortunate death, her child was taken to Hartford Town by Mrs. Henderson and given to Miriam Lass, the midwife. Miss Lass was instructed to find a wet nurse and keep Melinda’s daughter in her home until arrangements were made to send her to the Howes in Wyatt.

That is not to say she was abandoned, Hannibal. Please never imagine that. Mrs. Henderson herself checked in with the child each day, though sadly was not able to accompany the infant to her new home. The transfer was overseen by Miss Lass, whose discretion was absolute.

The sad truth of the matter, Hannibal, is that the baby died not long after she arrived at the Howes’. She seemed such a healthy little girl for what she'd suffered, but one can never know with infants just what is the cause. Mrs. Howe wrote to me a few days after the child's arrival to say she had gone in the night, peacefully so, and was laid to rest in their family plot.

I did not wish to add more guilt to that burden you bear, and so I resolved never to tell you, but I hope the knowledge will give you some peace on the matter. If you should like to arrange for a new stone or to visit the child's grave, I can provide the location for you, but my advice to you now is what it has always been—let it lie. Let Melinda rest. That poor young lady has been gone now for as long as she was ever alive. She deserves to have some little peace in her eternal rest.

“Miriam Lass,” Will murmured, his eyes meeting Hannibal's. The pain in his husband's eyes cut him to the quick—one way or another, Melinda's daughter was essentially lost to him. If Abigail was not that child, then the baby Hannibal had sacrificed so much to save was long since gone.

If Abigail was that child, he had no way to prove it, or claim her legally unless Miss Lass and Mrs. Hobbs could be compelled to speak the truth.

Will took a deep breath and slid his hand into Hannibal's. After a reflective silence, he ventured, “If what Mrs. Hobbs said is the truth, Hannibal, if she has details that can be confirmed, there is a happy outcome to be had after all.”

Hannibal's amber eyes shuttered, thoughtful, but he remained silent and utterly still in Will's grasp.

“Melinda’s daughter might yet be alive,” Will said, lifting Hannibal's hand to kiss it, a soft press of his warm lips over his knuckles to comfort him. “And where there is life, there is always a way. This need not be the end of your chance to know her, should she wish.”

Hannibal turned his hand to Will’s cheek and cupped his face, a sad smile curling the corners of his mouth.

“If Abigail is hers, and Melinda’s daughter does not lie in the cold earth far from her mother, then what choices do I have before me? Should I tear her away from the family who loves her?” Hannibal whispered. “In doing what is right to honor Melinda, will I destroy other lives? I cut that little girl from her mother’s womb, Will. Should I be sentenced to cut her from her mother's arms, in turn, considering they never should have had her?”
“I think the best course of action,” Will said, leaning into his hand, a solid presence for Hannibal to hold fast to, “is to simply talk with Mrs. Hobbs. If what she shares can chase the shadow of any doubt from our minds, then a decision can be made regarding what should be done. What is just is not always what is right, in so many cases.”

Hannibal heaved a sigh and dropped his hand, saying, “Yes, of course. One crisis at a time, was it?”

“Preferably,” Will agreed, stroking Winston's head when he pushed his muzzle between them, his anxious brown eyes trained on Hannibal. “I will send someone down for Mrs. Hobbs and ask her to meet us. A discussion amidst all this noise is not ideal, as you mentioned, but we have precious little options.”

“We'll send the crew home for the day,” Hannibal suggested, and when Will's eyebrows rose, he added, “They will be glad of the rest and I, for one, shall be glad of the silence. We can have our discussion with Mrs. Hobbs in peace, and she will have privacy for any confessions she might wish to make.”

“And the crew can return in the morning, fresh from their reprieve, and finish the job to everyone’s relief,” Will said, nodding as he stroked Winston's soft ears. “I believe we have a plan, Lord Clarges.”

Hannibal said nothing, falling back into his worries regarding what was to come.

“Hannibal?” Will softly said, untangling his fingers from Hannibal's to loop his hand through his husband's arm. “We'll get this sorted.”

“We will,” Hannibal said, the uncertain tone of his voice belying the confident nod he gave. “Whatever the outcome, we will know the truth. And no matter how painful, the truth will always out.”

Will averted his gaze, both of them suddenly reminded—and forcefully so—that they had not been wholly truthful with one another, but neither was able to address it with so many other cares to distract them.

Quiet descended on Marsham Heath once more. The staff cleaned the parlor up with efficient haste as one of the houseboys ran down to escort Mrs. Hobbs up. Neither of the Lords Clarges expected her to refuse—an invitation from a Marquess was virtually unheard of, and her prior behavior showed how heavily her conscience weighed on her. She would come.

Her good sense would demand it.

Hannibal paced the carpet between the settees, hands clasped behind his back. Winston’s head turned to and fro watching him, Hannibal's restless energy putting even Will on edge.

“My Lords,” Mr. Thatcher said, drawing Hannibal's immediate attention. “Mrs. Hobbs has arrived.”

“Bring her, please, Thatch,” Hannibal said, composing himself. He smoothed his jacket and tugged his cuffs, taking comfort in familiar habits. Will watched him, wishing there was something more he could do to comfort his husband, but knowing he could only do so much.

Louise Hobbs was admitted to the parlor with quiet reserve, her hands clutched before her. She was wearing a very lovely dress, much removed from the simple skirts and blouses Will had seen her in to date. It touched him, thinking of her choosing what she would wear, nervous and facing the potential loss of her daughter but hoping to make a good impression, trying to appear at her very best. A good woman. A good mother.

Will knew what it felt like to walk into a room of people he imagined were his betters, to feel small in their presence, unimportant in the grand scheme of things. It moved him to rise and grasp her hands with warmth, saying, “Louise. It is so good of you to come on such short notice. And how lovely you look.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” she said, blushing like a maiden, flustered by her reception. “I wish I had something nicer.”

“Never think so, Mrs. Hobbs,” Hannibal said, his manners kicking in and overtaking his nerves. “You look perfectly lovely, and it is very good to meet you at last. Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you,” she said, her voice small. She did as she was bidden, glancing around despite herself, her movements hesitant as if she feared to disturb something.

“Mrs. Hobbs,” Hannibal said, settling across from her and reaching for Will's hand to pull him down at his side. “I think perhaps you know why we have asked you here.”
Her mouth bowed down in an unhappy frown. She would not lift her eyes to meet his, nor Will’s, just twisted her fingers in her lap. Winston, sensing her distress, moved to nose her knee and she jumped.

“He’s very gentle, Mrs. Hobbs,” Will said, leaning across to rub Winston’s head. He smiled when she relaxed and followed his lead, glad that the friendly dog could help comfort her.

Mrs. Hobbs stroked Winston's head in silence, gathering her thoughts, and finally said on a tremulous whisper, “I always knew this day would come.”

Hannibal leaned forward, closing the distance between them, doing his best to remain unassuming and without threat. There was a soft Alpha purr in his deep voice when he asked, “You knew we Lecters would call for you?”

She nodded, tearful.

“Mrs. Hobbs,” Will said, patting Hannibal’s thigh to keep him from looming closer, knowing his husband had very little awareness of how intimidating he could seem when he was so intensely focused. “Louise, I think the time has come for you to tell us about Abigail.”

She lifted her blue eyes, shimmering tears spilling over and down her cheeks. “I never meant any harm, my Lords. I never dreamed that you would want her back.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, Mrs. Hobbs,” Hannibal said, fishing out his handkerchief and handing it to her. She took it with a hand that trembled and patted at her tears. “Perhaps you should start at the beginning, with Ms. Lass.”

“Please, Mrs. Hobbs,” Will said when she hesitated. “It is very important. There is a strong possibility you are mistaken—”

“No, my Lord, I’m not,” she said, drawing a fortifying breath. She buried her hand in Winston’s fur again, an excuse not to meet their curious gazes. “I was there, you see, when the housekeeper came. The one from Hartford House?”

“Mrs. Henderson,” Hannibal supplied, and she nodded.

“Yes,” Mrs. Hobbs said, managing to meet his amber gaze. “I’d come to see my cousin, Miriam. Garret and I were to adopt a little girl, you see, given my husband’s—given that we never could have a child of our own. We wanted to take in a Hartford child, as our families were Hartford folk from way back. We wanted to... to keep our own.”

“It is such a gift to be able to bring a child into your home,” Will prodded, hoping to keep her momentum going. “It was very kind of you to expand your family with someone who needed your love.”

It seemed to bolster her and she stopped trembling, more saddened now than nervous.

“All we ever wanted was a child of our own,” she admitted, her ache echoing in Will’s chest. He found his fingers tightening on Hannibal’s leg, a clutch for balance when her anguish threatened to overcome him. “Miriam was a midwife there and saw her fair share of babies without mothers. There was a woman in Hartford, too many mouths to feed and her husband unable to work. She was older, old enough the baby was a surprise she couldn’t afford to enjoy. Miriam wrote to me to come when she neared her time, but when we arrived, the little girl was sickly.”

She looked from Hannibal to Will and back again, as if willing them to understand and see how reasonable her actions seemed at the time.

“Miriam wanted to keep her for a bit, see if she could get her to rally,” Mrs. Hobbs said, tears overflowing anew. “But she was so weak. And then one evening your Mrs. Henderson came down from the House.”

“You saw her?” Hannibal asked, surprised that the housekeeper would not have mentioned there being someone else present, or would have dared risk revealing family business in front of a stranger.

“No, my Lord,” Mrs. Hobbs said, shaking her head. “No, Miriam left me sitting with the baby in her bedroom and went to answer the door, but I could hear them speaking. She said the child was to go to a genteel family. She gave Miriam a goodly sum of money for her care and asked her to tend to the baby until further arrangements could be made.”

“Then you had no idea she was from Hartford House?” Will clarified, brow furrowing when Louise shook her head.

“Not until Miriam said so,” Mrs. Hobbs confessed. “Our little one took a turn for the worse that week, you see. Miriam knew... I could tell that she knew my little girl wouldn’t survive. There was something wrong, she said, wrong inside of her. I didn’t know what to do. What were we to do?”

“Mrs. Hobbs,” Hannibal coaxed. “What did you do?”

“We took your daughter,” she said, the words a harsh whisper, said with her eyes wide with horror, as if speaking it out loud made her realize the enormity of what they had done. “She was so perfect and lovely, with the bluest eyes. Miriam knew
how much we needed her. She took that poor little infant from me, struggling with every breath, and she laid little Abigail in my lap. She said no one would realize, that she would keep the sickly baby in her arms when the housekeeper visited and we could take our Abigail with no one the wiser... but someone must have known."

“Mrs. Hobbs,” Hannibal said, frightfully still at Will’s side, the details of her story fitting too well to mistake, yet he needed undeniable confirmation. “Did Abigail have anything unusual about her? Anything that stood out to you?”

Mrs. Hobbs nodded without hesitation, a dedicated mother’s knowledge of her child.

“Yes, my Lord,” she answered, fumbling in her modest, worn reticule to withdraw a faded ribbon. “She had this red ribbon binding her cord and a cloverleaf birthmark on her heel.”

Hannibal’s eyes widened and Will felt a rush of confusion from him, relief and outrage vying in equal part as he plucked that ribbon from her fingers. He inspected it, taken forcefully back to the moment when he had bound the baby’s round little belly with it, wretched with grief while she cried for a mother who would never hear her voice.

His broad shoulders bowed and he shuddered. Dropping his head into his hand to hide the sheen of tears in his amber eyes, he thrust the ribbon back at Mrs. Hobbs, an accusation she accepted.

“She is Melinda’s daughter,” Hannibal breathed, hot tears trailing from his sheltering hand. “Gods, Will, she’s alive. She is Melinda’s daughter.”

“I am sorry if we caused you grief, my Lord,” Mrs. Hobbs said, breaking into fresh tears when she saw he was crying. “We aren’t bad people! We thought... we were told that the child was unwanted, that she was to be sent as far from Hartford as possible. Why shouldn’t we have her, if you didn’t want her?”

“Mrs. Hobbs, it is rather more complicated than that,” Will began, but cut off when Hannibal suddenly lifted his head, his eyes rimmed in red and blazing.

“Hannibal,” Will murmured, leaning close to him, tasting his distress, feeling it twice over through his bond. “Hannibal?”

“She is Melinda’s daughter,” Hannibal breathed, hot tears trailing from his sheltering hand. “Gods, Will, she’s alive. She is Melinda’s daughter.”

“I am sorry if we caused you grief, my Lord,” Mrs. Hobbs said, breaking into fresh tears when she saw he was crying. “We aren’t bad people! We thought... we were told that the child was unwanted, that she was to be sent as far from Hartford as possible. Why shouldn’t we have her, if you didn’t want her?”

“Mrs. Hobbs, it is rather more complicated than that,” Will began, but cut off when Hannibal suddenly lifted his head, his eyes rimmed in red and blazing.

“Mrs. Hobbs, please excuse me, but I think it is time for you to go.”

“Hannibal!” Will said, his surprise at his husband’s abrupt statement fading to grim understanding. Hannibal was beside himself, caught off balance by what he had learned, no matter how prepared he’d thought himself. He was struggling to contain an impulsive reaction and Will acted accordingly. He cast a sympathetic look at Mrs. Hobbs and said, “I’ll see you out, Louise. I think my husband needs some time to compose himself.”

He stroked Hannibal’s nape as he stood, not envying Hannibal the decisions he must make but knowing he would support them.

“I’ll return in a moment,” Will told him, and gestured Winston to stay by Hannibal’s side. The lovable dog promptly inserted his snout under Hannibal’s hand and whined, trying to comfort him.

Louise, swollen-eyed and sniffling, said nothing until Will walked her to the drive, where she asked in a tremulous whisper, “Will he take her from us?”

“I honestly cannot predict what he will do,” Will said, frowning. “He would be within his rights, Louise, I will not deceive you on that count. But my husband has known great loss in his life and he would not cause your family any pain if it could be avoided. From there, we shall simply have to hope.”

“I should never have told her,” she wept, so upset Will was half a mind to send the houseboy back down with her, just to see that she was safe. “I didn’t want to lie to her! She should know where she came from, shouldn’t she?”

“You followed your heart, Mrs. Hobbs,” Will said, squeezing her trembling hand. “That is all any of us can do.”

“Garret is going to be so heartbroken,” she said, her voice cracking on a sob.

“I am so sorry, Louise,” Will said, and genuinely meant it. “I truly hope things turn out for the best for us all. May I have someone accompany you home?”

“No, my Lord, I-I wish to be alone,” she said, and pressed the handkerchief back into his hand. “Beg him to deal gently with us, as we have with his daughter. We have loved her with everything in us and always will. Tell him that?”

“I will, Louise,” Will promised, watching until she vanished beneath the crest of the hill.

He lingered a little while longer, giving Hannibal time to gather his thoughts before he went back inside. Mr. Thatcher was standing vigil at the parlor door and Will asked, “Mr. Thatcher, could bring some brandy in? His Lordship is in need of some fortification.”
“I will do so, my Lord,” Mr. Thatcher said, and tottered off towards the kitchen.

Will admitted himself back into the parlor, finding Hannibal much as he had left him—troubled, torn, and hurting, but with one hand stroking Winston’s head. Silent, Will settled next to him and took Hannibal’s free hand in his, rubbing his palm with both thumbs. He worked the fine bones of Hannibal’s wrist beneath his cuff, up the length of his graceful fingers and down again.

“They stole her, Will,” Hannibal whispered, warm and tense against him but relaxing in increments at Will’s touch. “I will have to get guardianship and correct this.”

Will said nothing, neither approving nor disapproving, merely soothing him.

“She could have been living with the Howes all this time,” Hannibal said, sitting back in the seat to look at his husband’s serene face. “She could have been in the best school, with good prospects. She could have been so much more.”

“There is nothing less about what Abigail is, or her life here,” Will said, a gentle reminder to Hannibal that his status was clouding his judgment. “She has had a happy childhood with parents who love her with everything in them.”

“One of whom has twice scared the life out of you,” Hannibal countered. “What if he mistreats her?”

“Louise wouldn’t allow for it,” Will murmured, drawing Hannibal’s other hand across his lap to give it the same treatment.

“What do you think I should do?”

There was a world of consequence in his question and Will stilled for a moment before resuming his massage.

“This isn’t my decision to make, Hannibal,” he said, finally tipping his face up to look at his husband.

“It’s our decision,” Hannibal said, sitting up to capture Will’s hands in his, anxious and urgent. “Will, I’ll not force another outcome on you that you have no say in! Whatever conclusion we make in regards to Miss Hobbs, we must make together.”

He dropped Will’s hands and cupped his face instead, rubbing his nose to Will’s, breathing in his welcoming scent until all of the agitation, frustration, and upset died down to mere shadows of themselves. Will’s warm breath ghosted over his lips and his slender hands rose to grasp Hannibal’s wrists, a gentle, caressing pressure.

“So much of your life has happened to you, Will,” Hannibal breathed, staring into his fathomless blue eyes. “I want this to be something you choose.”

Will’s lids fluttered closed and a smile teased his full mouth, though it was sad and somewhat lost.

“It will always be yours to choose,” Hannibal reminded him, and pressed a soft kiss to his mouth, seeking reassurance and finding it in the warm welcome he received.

He felt stronger for that kiss, more certain he could do what was right for everyone, not just for himself or his memory of Melinda. He smiled against Will’s mouth and whispered the only joy he could find in what had happened, “She’s alive.”

“She is,” Will agreed, a soft, delighted laugh lilting in the words. “And she’s a beautiful young lady.”

They drew apart just a small space, and Hannibal sighed, “She is nearly grown, isn’t she?”

“Very nearly,” Will said, adding, “Not far from being ready to venture off into the world if she chooses.”

Hannibal smiled as Will’s subtle point hit home, unraveling the tangled knot inside him with a deft, expert touch. It needn’t be one extreme or another. It needn’t be immediate and irreversible, destructive action. There was a young lady nearly an adult at the heart of this matter and, as his mate had reminded him, she was the one whose decisions carried weight in the end.

“Ah, I do rely on you,” Hannibal said, pulling Will half into his lap to embrace him and delving into his curls, even as Will huffed with good-hearted indignation. “One moment the world is ugly chaos and the next it is neat and orderly, all because of you.”

“Because of me?” Will asked, wriggling to straighten but subsiding, content enough to have put up token resistance. “I haven’t done anything, Hannibal.”

“Nonsense,” Hannibal said, squeezing him and relaxing. “All I could think was that I would destroy a family if I tried to know Miss Hobbs, offend her parents or imprison them, one. I saw tragedy behind every option, but now I can imagine resolving this to everyone’s benefit. Because of you and the way you always remind me that the choices don’t always belong to us.”
“She knows her own mind, Hannibal,” Will confirmed, nuzzling his jaw, drawn by the earthy scent of his skin. “A young woman striking out in the world can only benefit from powerful friends. The important thing is that Abigail is happy. That would be the best homage to Melinda you could ever give.”

Hannibal nodded, tucking Will closer to him on the settee. “We will speak with Miss Hobbs and her parents all together and see what we can do to assist her situation and keep her safe. Our involvement in her affairs, and hers in ours, can grow from there.”

“That is an incredibly reasonable solution, Lord Clarges,” Will praised. “Very impressive coming from an Alpha.”

Hannibal chuckled, and subsided, once more grateful for his mate and the calm reason he could impose on the worst of issues. After a comfortable silence of holding Will in his arms, he was inspired to admit, “I’ve missed you.”

Will laughed, surprised to hear him say such a thing, and reminded him, “I’ve spent very little time absent from you, Hannibal.”

“No, I mean I’ve missed you,” Hannibal said, the emphasis getting Will’s attention. He tipped his head up to find his husband’s amber eyes on him and felt his belly tighten in response. Hannibal touched his jaw, fingers sliding beneath the curve of bone to brush his scent glands, gathering traces of Will’s distinctive sweet perfume on his fingertips.

“Hannibal,” Will said, the mild scold of his tone lost in the gentle way he said it. He pressed his hand to Hannibal’s chest, the pumping of his heart thumping a steady rhythm against his palm, and pushed himself up just a hair to meet his husband’s eyes.

“You,” Hannibal said, looking at Will with unabashed awe and something that Will dared not try to name, “have the most curious effect on me, Will. When I feel lost, I find myself clinging to you. When something troubles me, I bring it to you.”

He stroked Will’s cheek, tracing his fingertip over his chin to rub his full lower lip.

“When I am happy, I reach for you,” Hannibal murmured. “I have never had anyone to share my joys and sorrows with; I have always been alone until now. I find I am greedy for you.”

Then you are your grandfather’s progeny,” Will whispered, touching his tongue to the tip of Hannibal’s finger and tasting the sweetness of his own skin.

“I am,” Hannibal said, fascinated by the way Will gazed up at him, vivid blue eyes behind thick lashes and his lips barely curled around his fingertip. “I miss you each time you sit across from me. I miss you each time you leave the room. I miss you each time you touch my hand or smile at me, because close can never be close enough, it seems.”

Will’s cheeks pinked but he smiled, pleased, and Hannibal slid his fingers back to stroke Will’s curls again.

“I am greedy for you, Will,” Hannibal said again, his lips curving in a cat-like smile.

“Are you propositioning me, Lord Clarges?” Will asked with a small smirk. “Because I shall have to lock the door in case Mr. Thatcher returns some day with our brandy.”

“Is that an invitation to ogle?” Hannibal countered, his spirits rising.

“No,” Will laughed, levering himself up a bit closer, careful of his weight on his husband, who refused to see him as anything other than incredibly dainty. “But perhaps it’s an invitation of a sort.”

Hannibal smiled, brows shooting up in surprise.

“Now who is doing the propositioning?” he teased, cupping the back of Will’s skull through his fragrant curls.

“I am,” Will admitted. “I can’t have my husband incapacitated from missing me. Perhaps it would be for the best if I check on you this evening.”

“I do have nightmares,” Hannibal said. “I would very much appreciate your help in chasing them away. A watch is only so much comfort, after all.”

“You are my husband,” Will said, echoing Hannibal’s words back to him, “and I will protect you.”

Hannibal grinned and tipped his head, sharing a slow, lingering kiss that was rudely interrupted by the parlor door being flung open.

Winston barked in response and the two of them leapt apart, but Berger had no care for that. Urgently, the pink-faced valet said, “Beg your pardon, my Lords, but you’re needed!”

“Needed? What on earth?” Hannibal said, surging to his feet and pulling Will with him, Winston adding his own opinion to the chaos as they all headed out into the yard.
One of Magistrate Crawford’s men was waiting for them, looking ill and unhappy. His spine snapped straight when he saw the Lords Clarges coming his way and he said without preamble, “There’s been another body found, m’Lords! Fresh, so to speak. Magistrate’s sent me to fetch you.”

“Berger, keep Winston with you, please,” Will said, even as Hannibal said, “Lead the way.”

The body was quite a distance from where they had found the other, but it was fresh, as the officer had said. Fresh enough that the man who had stumbled upon her had known who she was and set the town on its ear with the news.

Jack greeted them with nothing more than a cursory, flat stare, taut and unhappy as his men and the detectives scoured the area. They were shown to the body in silence with the glowering Magistrate in attendance.

It was the same sort of pile, feet covered by hands, topped with the head shorn of hair, barely touched by decay.

“My gods,” Hannibal breathed, crouching to examine her, his amber eyes skating up to Jack’s grim face. “Is this the girl who just vanished?”

Jack nodded, unable to speak for a moment. Will crouched next to Hannibal, his narrowed eyes finding the unusual patterning where the neck had been parted from the trunk.

“These are bite marks,” Hannibal murmured to him, pointing without touching.

Will heard Jack launch into a theory of assault, but he knew it was not that. The same shadowy, unwholesome presence that had lingered over the other remains returned. It resolved itself into a beast, skeletal and charred, taking shape in coils of temper and strings of despair, withered and starving and never satisfied, no matter what it devoured.

Overwhelming greed that had driven him to destroy.

To consume.

Mine...

The beast bent down, jagged fangs sinking deep into that child’s flesh. It tore a chunk free and swallowed it.

“He’s eating them,” Will whispered, swallowing hard against bile that threatened to rise.

Jack gaped down at him, unable to comprehend such a vile thing.

Hannibal, however, merely took another assessing look at the body, realization filling his fine features.

“He’s eating them, Jack,” Will said, numb with understanding.

The beast raised its head and Will stared into the face of Garret Jacob Hobbs.

The smokehouse lit day and night and woods empty of prey.

Mine.

“Oh, my gods...”

“Will?”

The beta wife who never bore a child.

Mine.

The daughter who wanted to find her birth parents.

Mine.

A barren Alpha whose fundamental and primary drive had been rendered inert and redirected towards hunting.

Mine.

A lifetime of Omegas who refused to bond to a sterile Alpha.

Mine, mine, mine—all of this is mine. You will never take this from me, not now, not ever.

Grasping, greedy hands like claws laying claim to what he thought was being stolen from him, chewing it up and swallowing it down to make it all part of him forever.

And they had just struck a match to the tinder and ignited a blaze.

“I was wrong,” Will said, sickened to his core. “It isn’t the girls of this village he has a grudge against, it’s the daughters.”

“Will? What is it?” Hannibal asked, his attention sharp as a blade.

“It’s Hobbs,” Will gasped, surging to his feet, Hannibal rising with him, alarmed by his sudden concern. “Abigail is in danger!”
Will pulled away from his husband in a near-blind panic and ran back towards the village, his fear granting him speed, his heart pounding and his ears ringing with the sound of his own harsh breathing and the echoing snarl, ‘Mine, mine, mine!’ Hannibal dashed after his mate, Will’s horror, his despair and terror welling up like a vise around his heart.

“What on earth was all that?” Magistrate Crawford demanded, crashing after him. “I thought you said he could handle this?”

“He did handle it,” Hannibal called back, trying to keep Will’s fleeing form in sight. His mate’s comments strung themselves together, a tapestry of realization that made him shout, “He knows who your murderer is, Magistrate Crawford. We have to get to the Hobbs house, and quickly!”

Despite his confusion, Jack followed his gut and came with Hannibal in pursuit of Will, the two of them rushing through the woods at an angle in the hopes of intercepting him.

Hannibal could only desperately hope and pray they caught up to him before Will caught up to their killer.

Will burst from the treeline and hit the lane at a dead sprint, his blood roaring in his ears, his heart pounding. Over and over, all he could think was that their meeting with Mrs. Hobbs might have tipped the delicate balance of Mr. Hobbs’ control and he would finally take what was precious to him.

His Abigail, his little girl, his only daughter, slaughtered and eaten, far beyond the reach of any hands that might steal her away from him.

Will spied the Hobbs’ cottage ahead and saw the door standing open, a splash of blood on the panel, a crimson smear of grasping fingers wrenched away.

“Will!”

The sound of Hannibal’s voice was so distant, hollow, unable to reach Will where he was at, floundering in darkness where the boogeyman snatched children and gobbled them up, all of them up, leaving only their head, hands, and feet.

Will didn’t dare wait on him, even as his husband and the Magistrate bore down on the little house. He pushed his way inside, calling out, “Mrs. Hobbs! Abigail!”

The coppery, sharp scent of blood reached him at the same time he heard the soft, stifled sound of someone weeping.

“Abigail! Mrs. Hobbs! It’s Will Gr—Lord Clarges!”

He caught the rotten, bitter scent of Garret Jacob Hobbs and his heart began to thump a frenetic staccato when the sting of blood flooded over it, strong enough to dim even that unwholesome stench.

“Mr. Hobbs, the Magistrate is nearly here!” Will called, trembling but determined as he eased down the hallway. He could see into the little kitchen where a pale hand broke the line of the door frame, fingers still.

Louise Hobbs lay splayed out on the floor of her kitchen in a spreading pool of blood. Her throat was parted in an obscene, gaping red smile at odds with the shock plastered on her white, slack face.

“Louise!” Will called, and rushed to her side, trying in vain to close that smile, to somehow force the blood to reverse its flow back into her gurgling throat. Her blue eyes rolled in horror before they dimmed, and Will followed her gaze, her blood hot on his hands and seeping into his clothes.

Garret Jacob Hobbs himself was backed into the corner, his terrified daughter held fast against his chest, half hostage and half shield.

“Stay back!” Hobbs snarled, the Alpha boom in his voice causing Will to flinch despite himself, but he couldn’t look away. He was compelled to mend this situation for the sake of the child trembling in her father’s hold.

“Mr. Hobbs,” Will said, lifting his steady hands, familiar calm overtaking him. “Mr. Hobbs, Magistrate Crawford is outside. Please, don’t make this worse than it already is. Let Abigail g—”

“No!” It was a snarl, a reverberating shout that thudded through Will’s bones. Fury, guilt, and a terrible sorrow that had fired instincts over and over to a task his inutile body could not perform. The sheer wretched horror of it made Will’s mouth tighten, resenting he could so easily find sympathy for such a vile man.
The bloody knife in Hobbs' hand flew to Abigail's throat in an instant. He was wild-eyed, a cornered, rabid animal willing to deal as much destruction as he could before his inevitable end. "You wanted to take her away from me, didn't you? Coming around here, sniffing after my daughter! I knew! I knew! You can't have her! She's mine!"

"Mr. Hobbs," Will said, again, taking a tentative step forward, Louise's blood trailing against the toe of his boot. He stopped when the knife pressed harder and Abigail sobbed, her huge blue eyes entreating him to help her.

Will trembled, hearing Hannibal calling for him and Jack shouting, "Garret Jacob Hobbs! Come out right now!"

Hobbs jumped, squeezing Abigail tighter.

"You just don't understand," he snarled, the crack in his voice making Abigail whimper, straining away from the blade at her throat.

"I do," Will said, ignoring their calls, Hobbs' own resentment dripping from his words. "I do understand. She's yours, isn't she? You were the one who raised her, weren't you? Drying her tears when love broke her heart, teaching her how to handle herself? She's yours. I swear, she's yours. We would never seek to take her from you, any of us—"

The front door banged open and the two men burst into the house, shouting for Abigail, shouting for Will.

Hobbs' eyes widened, showing whites all around. His knife hand trembled, wavered, but steeled hard with purpose when the thunder of boots on the floorboards grew nearer.

"Just be still," Hobbs said, anguished by his choices. "It'll be over soon and everything will be just fine. You're mine. My Abigail, my little girl. No one is ever going to take you from me."

Will saw him tense, saw the muscles in his forearm bunch with intent, and something else entirely took him over, some deep-dwelling instinct to protect her, this motherless daughter, this terrified child who had stirred such chaos with nothing more than a desire to know where she came from.

The dead woman on the floor stared up at him, her ability to protect her precious child stripped of her, and how dare he? How dare he? What did he know about having a baby? What did he know about loving someone past the bounds of all reason? What did he know about wiping tears and soothing scrapes and soft, whispered secrets, of shy smiles and the gentle talks had over the burgeoning beginnings of womanhood?

He knew nothing. He was only an Alpha claiming his property, not a father. A father would never do such things.

He had no right to do such things.

"Don't you dare touch my daughter!" Will snarled, lunging as the knife began to move, launching himself forward to grab Hobbs' arm with such force he tackled him sideways, all three of them tumbling to the floor.

Abigail rolled away, gasping and coughing, blood welling over her pale fingers where they pressed to her throat, her blue eyes pouring tears.

Will's fury rose like a tide. He thrashed beneath Hobbs when the Alpha twisted atop him, struggling to wrest the knife from his grip. Over their forced breaths and curses he heard an unearthly snarl that momentarily stunned them both, it was filled with such absolute and pointed threat.

The Alpha froze above him, but the snarl filled Will with strength, with surety his furious mate was coming, and nothing would stop him from protecting what was his. Will took advantage of Hobbs' stricken reaction and knotted one hand into a fist before smashing it into the Alpha's face.

Hobbs growled, his nose and lips bloodied, and flipped the blade around. With an echoing roar of mindless outrage, he drove the knife down towards Will's chest.

zzz

It was a very unsettling sensation for Hannibal's belly to sink in a sudden pit of horror, as if he were once more on the battlefield making his way through the severed pieces of lives lost. It was a feeling that filled him and erupted out of him in violence he had long since left behind him on foreign shores.

He didn't see the body of Louise Hobbs. He didn't see Melinda's daughter thrashing in her own blood.

He saw Will, his mate, pinned by a vile monster, a bloody knife flashing down to cut everything short, to wash every wonderful aspect of his amazing, unique husband from the world with one cruel thrust.

And Hannibal would rather die than allow that to happen.
He lunged, lessons hard learned at war so ingrained in him that his muscles moved from instinct. He smashed into Hobbs with another reverberating snarl, his momentum carrying both of them past Will to crash into the cast iron oven.

The Alpha flailed, compelled to fight, the knife nothing more than a trite inconvenience to Hannibal.

This man had threatened his mate. No flimsy knife would keep Hannibal from his retribution, no matter how the Magistrate raged, too wise to embroil himself in a fight between two Alphas.

Will gasped for breath, winded by his run and the struggle and Hobbs' lean weight. The air he sucked in was thick with Hannibal's powerful scent, the threat of his snarl manifesting in violence Will instinctively knew would not touch him.

The sound of Abigail choking ripped Will from the clashing Alphas before him. Trembling, Will shoved away from the mess of blood on the floor and fell sideways, fumbling his way to Abigail, who lay pale and frightened next to her dead mother, her blue eyes darting around a familiar room made alien by this nightmare.

“No, no, no! Abigail, it's going to be okay," he said, pressing his hand over hers to staunch the welling blood, his smile twisted and taut as he tried to reassure her. “You're safe, now.”

“M... mother?”

“Both of you stop!” Jack shouted, discharging his pistol into the ceiling.

It was a distraction Hobbs used to his advantage—momentarily freed of Hannibal's grip when he was flung against the wall, he turned and fled through the back door still clutching his knife, bouncing against the frame and staggering with the thrashing he'd taken.

Hannibal moved to pursue him, but Will's entreaty stopped him, the need to protect his mate far stronger than the need to fight.

“Hannibal, please,” Will said, his voice cracking with tension. “She's bleeding! Please, help her!”

Jack gave both of them a look of sweeping disapproval and vanished through the back door in pursuit of Hobbs, leaving Hannibal and Will to handle Abigail.

Bloodied from his battle and frightful with intensity, Hannibal moved at once to assess Melinda's daughter. His fighting fury died a quick death when he saw how dire her situation was, the Alpha in him giving way to the doctor. He had to firmly pry both Will's and Abigail's hands away from the wound, but he finally managed to uncover it.

What he saw made him pale.

“Sh, hush,” he soothed, panting as he plucked his handkerchief free of his pocket. He pressed it to her throat, palm holding it firmly in place while he got his breathing to slow. Abigail calmed then, responding to his firm control of a frightful situation, enough so that he could get a better look at Will.

Will anxiously watched him, his bloodied hand resting on Hannibal's shoulder, all of his attention focused on Abigail. Blood had sprayed his face, his clothing, his hands and body, but for everything that had happened he appeared unhurt. Softly, still struggling with the rage that had overcome him, Hannibal asked, “Are you hurt?”

Will shook his head, “No, he didn't get a chance. You got here before he could. Gods, Hannibal! He's hurt you!”

“Not as much as I hurt him,” Hannibal growled, bristling all over again.

Will touched Hannibal's busted lip with a wince, his concerned blue gaze torn between Abigail and his husband.

“He's taken off into the woods,” Jack said, pushing back in through the back entry in a mire of irritation. “What in the seven hells happened here?”

“You know as much as I do, Magistrate Crawford,” Hannibal said, lifting the handkerchief to see if the flow was slowing. “But if he lays hands on my mate again, he will not survive it.”

“Garret Jacob Hobbs is your killer, Jack,” Will said, hoping the explanation would suffice.

“We need to move Miss Hobbs up to Marsham,” Hannibal told them. “Now.”

Will helped him lift her, only half an ear to Jack asking, “So what set him off? What is all this? And how on earth could you know any of it, Lord Clarges?”

“You wanted to borrow my imagination, Jack, not dissect it,” Will reminded him, tucking Abigail's bloody skirts up out of the way for Hannibal to hitch her legs over his arm. “I can't tell you how it works any more than you can tell me how your authority works—it just does.”

“Now is not the time for explanations,” Hannibal said, hefting Abigail's slight weight easily against his chest.
“Humor me,” Jack said, hands on hips and irritated.

“Magistrate, this young lady needs medical attention and I cannot provide that here under these circumstances,” Hannibal said, tucking her higher into his arms to keep pressure on her throat, Will moving in synch to free her tangled hair from the crook of his arm. “One crisis at a time is rather our motto of late. I would appreciate it if you could escort us back to Marsham in case Hobbs decides to take his chances again.”

“I have no doubt you could handle it, Lord Clarges,” Jack said, eyeing them both when he said it, but he moved to the door ahead of them, a man rigidly bound to honoring his duties and faithful to the people in his charge.

They emerged from the cottage, flinching against the sunshine. It seemed as if hours had passed since going inside, yet it couldn’t have been more than a few moments. There was no time to thank the luck of their stars for walking out alive—Abigail was in dire straights and they rushed up towards Marsham as fast as Hannibal dared to go.

“Get that little girl taken care of,” Jack warned, breaking off near the trail that led back to the bodies, well within sight of Marsham Heath. “I’m going to round up those detectives and go looking for Hobbs. If we can get a confession—”

“You won’t get a confession,” Will warned, waving down one of the little house boys on watch in the yard, who gaped for a moment before darting off to warn Mr. Thatcher. “Hobbs has no intentions of surviving this. He’ll make you kill him, Jack, or else he’ll kill himself.”

“Then how will we prove he was our killer?”

Hannibal exchanged an uneasy look with Will and nodded encouragement.

“Check the smokehouse,” Will said, wishing he didn’t have to speak it, let alone imagine what he knew was inside. “That’s where you’ll find them... what’s left of them.”

Jack drew up as if Will had slapped him. There was a challenge in his dark gaze, almost resentment, as if by understanding the unforgivable somehow made Will complicit in Mr. Hobbs’ crimes. His eyes bored into Will with dangerous calm as he said, “Then we’ll go back, remove Mrs. Hobbs, and see what they have in the smokehouse, my Lord.”

The quiet at Marsham Heath gained a new intensity with the arrival of Miss Hobbs, who was taken directly up to Will’s room at his insistence. Mr. Berger followed Hannibal with his medical bag in hand and a curt order for the water to be brought up the moment it boiled.

With nothing to lend the impromptu hospital room and not wishing to be in the way, Will ordered every entrance to Marsham Heath be bolted shut and all the rooms locked in case Mr. Hobbs attempted to gain access to the house. He cleaned up quickly with Jimmy’s help and wrote letters to Mr. Buddish and to Grandfather explaining what had happened, who Abigail was, and asking for their advice in the matter. He then detailed everything concerning his involvement in Jack’s investigation and sent a copy down to the Magistrate’s office for public record. He also asked for all funeral arrangements for the Hobbs family, as well as those of the missing girls, be billed through Mr. Wells. It was the least he could do for them and for Louise Hobbs.

After that, all he could do was wait, mired in worry and impatient with his own anxiety when so many others had better reason to feel it.

He was pacing outside of the door when Mr. Berger emerged. Before he could even ask, Mr. Berger nodded and said, “She’s resting, poor lamb. Stitched up tight and will carry the scar all her years, but better that than gone into the good green earth.”

“Certainly better, Mr. Berger, thank you,” Will said on a deep, relieved sigh, a smile finally brightening his solemn face. “There’s a bath waiting for you downstairs, if you wish to use it.”

“Oh, but his Lordship—”

“Has a bath waiting as well,” Will assured him, spying Jimmy leaving Hannibal’s suite with a small nod of confirmation, “and I will tend him. You both have earned your rest and I intend to see that you get it.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Berger said, shoulders slumping but his smile firm. “He’s fair knocked about from that Hobbs fellow. Bless you for caring for him.”
“Bless you, Mr. Berger, and thank you. Your hard work is very appreciated,” Will said, and moved past him into his room, bracing himself for what was to come.

Abigail lay in his bed like a princess from a fairy tale, her snarled hair dark against the pillows, the blood on her skin dried almost black. She seemed so small to him, pale and vulnerable but clinging to life. Humanity’s stubborn determination to survive and overcome distilled into the pale and quiet body of a sixteen-year-old girl.

Hannibal stood gazing down at her, his arms loose at his sides, his rolled-back sleeves baring his graceful wrists and strong hands, bloodied from closing Abigail’s wound and bruised from his short, furious fight with Garret Jacob Hobbs. He sensed Will behind him but didn’t turn, a wordless invitation to join him.

Will stepped next to his side, pressing his hand to the base of Hannibal’s spine in unconscious echo of his husband’s touch. He settled against him, stroking him softly, and stood in silence waiting for Hannibal to speak.

“She lost quite a bit of blood,” Hannibal said, his voice a low purr in the silence. “But she’ll rally.”

“Your skill has saved another life, Hannibal,” Will whispered, his pride evident in the soft words. “For the second time, you saved her life.”

“I wish it hadn’t been necessary either time,” Hannibal told him. He lifted his arm and draped it over Will’s shoulders, turning to tug him into an embrace. Will felt him trembling, spent energy and intensity, too much a return to his ten years at war. He wrapped his arms around Hannibal’s waist and tipped his head, the slightest offering of his neck.

Hannibal buried his nose beneath Will’s jaw with a weighty sigh, drawing in the comfort of his scent and presence.

“I am... beyond angry at you,” he whispered.

“I know,” Will said, glad that Hannibal couldn’t see his small, sad smile. He smoothed Hannibal’s spine and squeezed him, pull the bloodied hands. “But right now you’re exhausted and can’t work up a proper temper, so you’ll just have to bear with it. I think a hot bath, a brandy, and some quiet should go a long way towards helping you regain your spleen, don’t you?”

“As lovely as that sounds, I now have a patient,” Hannibal said, and looked back at the bed, fond softness in his gaze. “A very precious patient.”

“Even more so than we expected,” Will agreed, but was determined his husband catch his breath. “She is stitched and resting, and there is nothing more you can do just now. I will have the girls come clean her up and change her clothing, and one of them can sit with her while you are otherwise indisposed.”

Hannibal’s mouth parted in a lopsided, tired grin and he leaned forward to kiss Will’s cheek, murmuring, “My voice of reason.”

“It’s a pity you never developed one,” Will whispered, leading him into the modest little washroom where the tub was filled to the brim with steaming water. “But I am glad I’m a suitable substitute. In you go.”

Grateful, Hannibal began to strip down at once. Will left him to it, ringing for Jimmy and giving instructions for Abigail to be bathed and changed. He had no suitable clothing for her, but one of his nightshirts would suffice.

Hannibal was slumped neck deep in water when he returned and slit an amber eye when he heard the door, both opening wide in surprise to see it was Will and not Berger.

“I sent Mr. Berger downstairs for a bath,” Will explained, shrugging out of his jacket and hanging it.

“That was kind of you,” Hannibal said, mystified when Will shed his waistcoat as well as his neckerchief. Will turned and paused, prompting Hannibal to say, “Don’t stop on my account.”

“Honestly,” Will sighed, rolling back his sleeves. “It’s not that sort of tending, Hannibal.”

“A man can always hope,” Hannibal said, sitting up when Will urged him to. He dragged a washcloth down into the water over his hips to spare his mate’s prim sensibilities. “Though I doubt I have it in me just now.”

Will quirked a brow at that, but only reached for the medical supplies Jimmy had very thoughtfully placed next to a separate basin. He settled on the small wooden stool, soaked a cloth in waiting antiseptic, and dabbed at the cut on Hannibal’s mouth. His concentration was absolute as he tended to his husband, smoothing his young face of any frown or wrinkle of worry. Therightness of it pulled a quiet, soothing purr from him, a low, near soundless vibration that caused Hannibal’s amber eyes to brighten with interest.
“Thank you, Will,” he murmured, just watching his little mate so intently clean his wounds, doing what he could to bring Hannibal comfort after the stress of saving Abigail.

“For tending you?” Will asked, wiping the last of the blood off of his face. The cuts were superficial, glancing blows landed from luck.

“For wanting to,” Hannibal said, smiling at him even though it pulled at his mouth, sore now that it was brought to his attention.

“You came to my defense without hesitation,” Will admitted, a becoming flush rising on his skin. “Despite how dangerous he was, you attacked him to save me. This is the least I can do for you, Hannibal.”

“There is no need to do anything,” Hannibal said, but didn't pull away. “You are my husband, Will. I could not bear it if anything were to happen to you.”

Will reached for the pile of linens and a thick bar of soap to distract himself from Hannibal’s piercing gaze and the flutter his words woke in his heart. He plunged the cloth into the hot bath water, unable to resist the sight of his husband's long back and the way his spine dipped into his round backside. He had the fleeting fear he might not have thought this through very well, but ignored it to soap the cloth up and begin a gentle but firm scrub of Hannibal's back.

“This certainly is an unexpected bright spot in an otherwise very taxing day,” Hannibal murmured, bending his knees up to lean forward, his head hanging. The dried blood on his hands pinked in the water. It trailed off of him in little dancing swirls that faded, life into nothingness in the blink of an eye.

He closed his eyes against the vision of Will vanishing into that house, stalwart and stubbornly brave. The awful panic began to rise again but he focused on his mate’s warm scent, on the pressure of his hands, on the even sound of his breath. He would have nightmares for the rest of his life, he knew; nightmares where he was too late, where that knife had already found a deadly sheath in Will's chest, where Hobbs took from him the most precious person in his life.

“I have written to Grandfather and to Mr. Buddish,” Will said, the husky timbre of his voice drawing Hannibal away from his dark thoughts. He washed Hannibal's back from nape to tailbone, shoulders to sides, gentle and ceaseless soothing until his body gave with the motion, yielding up its tension to his touch. “I have told them everything that happened here, and how our own matters crossed into those of the Hobbs family. I asked them plainly for any advice they could offer. I think we shall need it. Abigail is alone in the world, even if her father somehow survives what he has done. She has no one.”

“She has us.” Hannibal said, sitting up and leaning back to look up into Will's face. Thoughtful and solemn, he said, “We are her fathers, now.”

Will set the washcloth aside and smoothed his damp hands over Hannibal's face, tenderness filling him at the sight of his husband's earnest desire to make everything right.

“We are,” he agreed, fingers curling beneath Hannibal's jaw in search of his Alpha scent.

Hannibal lifted his dripping hand, a bare brush of fingertips under Will's chin. “I heard you say something.”

Will's brows furrowed in a frown, his bond to Hannibal pulling at him in concern.

“You shouted at Hobbs as I was coming into the house,” Hannibal said, and Will's cheeks bloomed with rosy color. “You called Abigail your daughter.”

Will stood abruptly, Hannibal's hand falling away. He needed distance for the censure that would surely come, his father's warnings cavorting in the back of his head in gleeful expectation of being right.

“That is not the first time I have noted such a thing happen to you, Will,” Hannibal said, sitting up to snare his wrist and turn Will back towards him. “Though not with such intensity.”

“I spoke in the moment, Hannibal,” Will said, allowing himself to be caught by his husband's worried gaze, by the strong fingers on his wrist, by the care that prompted those words. “I have said before I see too many pieces. The truth is, I can see things as others see them, as if I am them and they are me. I understand why they do the things they do, and with such clarity the line between myself and someone else grows... faint.”

“It is how you took a conversation with Mrs. Hobbs, an unpleasant encounter with Mr. Hobbs, and the gruesome sight of those dead children and connected them,” Hannibal said, pulling Will down to sit on the side of the tub. “It is why you fought for Abigail’s life as Louise would have, with a mother's own dedication to protecting her child.”

Will nodded, shaky, a shudder wracking his slender frame.
“It is a heavy burden, your Gift,” Hannibal decided, jarring Will from his dread.

“Excuse me,” he breathed, his eyes widening. “I’m sorry, but what did you say?”

“I said your Gift is a heavy burden,” Hannibal repeated, sliding his grip from Will’s wrist to his hand and lifting it to kiss his palm. “I had not fully understood until I saw it work today. I don’t think I entirely comprehended what it did to you, even after you explained. I thought it was a talent, like cold-reading a person, but now I see that this Gift of yours... it wounds you. It is a tool, sharp and pointed at both ends.”

Will stared at him for a long, silent moment, trembling with repressed feeling because no one in his entire life—including his own twin sister—had ever properly grasped just how profoundly harmful his Gift was.

And of all the people to understand him, the only one who could was Hannibal Lecter.

“That is precisely what it feels like,” Will admitted, Hannibal’s lips tickling his palm. “A tool I cannot control with any degree of mastery.”

“A very dangerous thing,” Hannibal mused, absently rubbing his thumb over Will’s skin in a soft caress. “Much more difficult to protect you from than papers.”

Will laughed softly at the unexpected humor of it, his fears retreating in the face of Hannibal’s warm understanding.

“In some cases, yes,” he said. “I am a burden despite my intentions.”

“No, Will, you are only yourself,” Hannibal corrected, relieved to see Will relaxing at his touch, the comfort working both ways. “And that is all you need to be.”

Will started, surprised to hear a version of his own mantra fall from his husband’s lips, but Hannibal seemed not to notice it.

He was looking at Will with weighty consideration his mate became aware of far too late.

In one liquid movement, Hannibal tugged his hand, scooped an arm around his waist, and pulled Will down to meet him in a slosh of water.

“Hannibal!” Will sputtered, flailing to grasp the sides of the tub and drag himself back out.

But Hannibal’s arm around his waist held him fast, preventing his escape.

“What on earth did you do that for?” Will flared, bracing his sodden boots at the rim and pushing himself more upright between his husband’s toned thighs.

“That is for giving me the fright of my life again,” Hannibal informed him, giving Will room enough to squirm around and face him.

The scolding he had prepared died on his lips when he saw the vast relief on Hannibal’s handsome face, echoing the emotions he could feel through his bond.

“I am furious you flung yourself so heedlessly into such a situation, Will,” Hannibal told him, tipping Will against his chest to nuzzle his curls. “I was so terrified to know you were in very real and mortal danger. I could have lost you, Will. Again, I could have lost you.”

“Hannibal,” Will said, reaching back to touch his cheek, the rasp of outgrowth rough against his sensitive fingertips. “You have every right to be angry with me, but please don’t scold me for—”

“I cannot scold you for adhering to your convictions, Will,” Hannibal said, drawing his mate closer to him, the press of his sturdy body a comforting weight against his own. He hugged him close, breathing in the perfume of his skin. “I am so grateful you are unharmed. You are incredibly brave, Will, and alarmingly foolhardy, but you plunged in with the desperate hope of saving what lives you could and managed to snatch Melinda’s daughter from Death’s embrace.”

Will warmed from the inside out, the fine sheen of sweat breaking out all over him as much from Hannibal’s praise as it was the heat of the water. It only intensified when Hannibal kissed the rim of his ear and whispered, “I am very angry at you, Will... and I hope each of our children inherit your disposition, though it will vex me to my grave, I’m sure, provided you haven’t done so yourself already.”

It coaxed a soft, surprised laugh from Will, the humor of it mingling with how easily Hannibal spoke of the children they might have. The possibility for new life after so much death here at Marsham Heath was heartening... and tempting.

“Despite the losses we sustained, this is a victory after all,” Hannibal murmured, his arm loosening at Will’s waist, his free hand stroking his slender side. “Melinda’s daughter is found, my mate is safe, and I will not lose either one of you again.”
“That is cause for celebration,” Will agreed, and sat up, the sight of his long back through his soaked shirt making Hannibal reconsider his own state.

For a moment he thought his mate would leave him, but Will only tugged his soaked boots and stockings off, dropping them in a pile on the wet floor. He reached for the bottle of brandy that had been placed near at hand and poured them both a measure.

“To victory,” he proposed, handing one glass to Hannibal and settling at the far end of the tub, his long feet resting against Hannibal’s hips.

Hannibal took hold of his sodden shirt and pulled Will into his lap, grinning when his mate easily straddled him with an expression of exasperated indulgence on his beautiful face.

“To keeping my reckless mate close,” he murmured, and kissed Will’s warm, full mouth, the brandy quite forgotten.

Chapter 34

There were a million reasons to dissuade Hannibal and Will from carrying their kiss further, starting with the lack of locks on the washroom doors, the proximity to their unexpected guest, and the unhelpful way in which the washroom seemed to amplify every tiny noise.

But despite all that, despite everything that had happened, the kiss they shared deepened with every second. It was a catharsis of pent-up tension and exhaustion. It was Hannibal spitting in the face of the gods again, resisting their attempts to cow him with devastation. He had come so close to losing Will, so very close.

Yet, Will was warm and very much alive in his lap and Hannibal was alive to marvel over him, and all else could burn to a crisp in the heat of his desire to love his little mate.

“What are you doing, Lord Clarges?” Will whispered, breaking the kiss. Hannibal’s hands sliding from his hips to his bottom pierced the sensual haze overcoming him. They cupped him, squeezing, pulling Will closer to him.

“Appreciating my mate,” Hannibal breathed between Will’s nibbling kisses. Their other encounters had been studied, cautious, exploratory, revelatory for them both. The sudden shift from seduction to intent took him by surprise. He hadn’t expected Will to be so receptive, for his scent to deepen to something Hannibal wanted to roll in and lap from his skin. The intensity of his mate’s responses left him awed but eager.

Perhaps he wasn’t the only one who had nearly lost someone important to them. The thought that Will might be growing in affection for him blazed into his heart, a well of hope springing up to quench the ever-present dread Will would decide they should part.

Will groped to put his cup down, sliding it haphazardly onto the tub-side tray with the bottle. He sat up and fished Hannibal’s little glass from under the water where he had let it fall without a care in his eagerness to touch his husband.

Hannibal feasted on the sight of him, drenched from his shoulders down, his slender, sturdy body revealed in exquisite detail, his shirt floating up to bare his trim waist. The back of his hair had dipped into the water when Hannibal dragged him in; it dripped water down the length of his graceful throat, tiny drops like a scattering of diamonds on his pearly skin.

It was what he couldn’t see that drew him most, however. Will’s brilliant mind, his vast and determined heart, the goodness that lay at his core even his father had not been able to gut him of. The same goodness that called him to danger time and again, always for others, always in defense of those who had no defenses for themselves even at the risk of snuffing his light out forever.

He sat up and drew Will in for another kiss, hungry and needy, tongue plundering the hot depths of Will’s mouth and trying his sharp little teeth until Will drew back, gasping for breath, questions in his big blue eyes

“Had I come a moment later—”

Hannibal couldn’t finish that sentence, couldn’t finish that thought, and he didn’t need to.

Will cupped his face, shaken by his anguish, by the care that gave birth to it. It was another confession hoarded, another breathless whisper to be held in his heart and nurtured. It slid down through him to find something deeper, teasing forth another thread that strengthened his bond to his husband.
“You didn’t,” he whispered, kissing Hannibal's forehead, tipping his chin up and closing his eyes in bliss when Hannibal bit him there beneath his jaw, possessive and fearful and compelled to taste him. He ached for Hannibal to bite his throat again, to lay those sharp teeth to his skin and mark him, claiming him at long last.

The shivering thought brought another flush to darken his skin and sudden understanding came with it. The pieces of his own puzzle turned and neatly fell into place and he knew without a doubt why he was so eager to encourage his husband into deeper intimacy.

His heat was coming, the faintest brush of it like feathers on his sensitive skin, slow and insidious and tempting him closer to satisfying its demands.

Hannibal purred and bit him, the sharp press of his teeth pulling a breathless, soft moan from Will's plump lips. He gripped Hannibal's slick, smooth shoulders with both hands, muscle shifting beneath his fingers, all that raw power just waiting for his touch. Every inch of him radiated Alpha strength, the bruises from his fight badges of victory, marks Will caressed with care, marveling how they were gained in defense of him.

“Will,” Hannibal whispered, lapping at his damp skin, dragging his fangs over Will's flesh to mouth beneath his jaw, sucking to draw more of his scent out. The heat in his groin was unbearable, his knot loosely filling as if anticipation alone was enough to bid it rise. The only other time he'd been so unbearably roused was during his rut, and a part of him wondered if his enticing husband's nearness had triggered it after all these years.

“You taste like heaven,” he moaned, forsaking the thought for the pleasure of feeling his mate through every sense—the fragrance of his flesh, the quivering of his muscles, the unsteady rush of his breath as he panted, the flavor of his skin, the sight of him flushed and feverish with desire. What hope did Nature Herself have in the face of such bounty? She could take Her course as She pleased, so long as Will would kiss him.

“Heaven tastes like soap?” Will asked, his soft laugh biting off on a gasp when Hannibal squeezed him close, rearing up between his legs in insistent heat, the washcloth long gone. “Hannibal, we shouldn't.”

Hannibal gave him one last suck and lifted his head, laving his tongue over Will's lips. He gave Will's perfect backside another lingering caress and slid his hands to his hips, thumbs brushing absent circles over his hip bones beneath the cloudy water.

“Abigail is just there,” Will said, wondering which of them he was trying to convince.

“She's sleeping,” Hannibal whispered, trailing his tongue up to Will's ear to nibble him.

Will tipped his head, the sweet ache in his groin even deeper, a live coal being blown into a flame in his belly. “What if we wake her?”

Hannibal kissed him again, coaxing Will's tongue with his own, teasing him, his hands hot and firm against Will's hips.

“We'll be quiet,” he breathed, nipping Will's plump lower lip, head tipping to fit his mate's mouth in perfect union.

“I don't believe you,” Will told him, refusing to look down, but closing his eyes only made him all the more aware of that hot flesh pushing up between the press of their bellies, swollen and twitching. His own body thrummed to reached it, fighting the confines of his wet clothing in a titillating rub of fabric over his delicate skin. “You're very...”

“Irresistible?” Hannibal supplied, rolling his hips just a fraction to press harder between Will's marvelous thighs.

“Flawless in my seduction?”

“Vocal,” Will said, his breath catching on a gasp.

“You're right,” Hannibal sighed, kissing his chin and then his mouth again. “We should just... finish our bath.”

“Yes,” Will agreed, disappointed to let logic win. It was for the best, however, considering how little inhibition he could muster in regards to his husband. At least now he knew why, though it left him feeling hollow to think it was all a heat-induced construction. It frustrated him to doubt himself, that he could not simply enjoy Hannibal's attention as a shared delight instead of as something their respective biologies might be pushing them towards.

Hannibal loosened his hold on Will, turning him to settle between his spread thighs.

Will shifted with him, coming to rest with Hannibal's sex pressing insistently against his lower back, cradled by his husband's body and the warm, sweetly-scented water. Hannibal tugged Will to rest against his broad, furry chest and plucked up the bar of soap, working up a thick lather between his hands.
Will watched with a throb of anticipation as Hannibal’s soapy hands dropped to cup his chest, drawing the wet shirt taut over his large, dark nipples. They stiffened instantly, aching and tight, and he dropped his head back, unable to watch when Hannibal began to rub his soapy hands in a slow massage over his chest.

“Is this finishing our bath?” Will whispered, thighs spreading to ease the pressure in his groin, the confines of his pants almost unbearable.

“It is,” Hannibal purred, teasing his tongue into Will’s ear. He caught Will’s nipples between his spread fingers and pinched lightly with each pass, tugging them as he soaped Will’s chest. “You washed my back, after all. I’m just returning the favor.”

Will shivered, relishing each pass of Hannibal’s palms over his chest, biting his lips against a moan when he used his fingertips to tease Will’s nipples to stiff fullness through his sodden shirt.

He could feel his slumberous heat awakening, roused by his husband’s touches, but Will couldn’t stop him. He didn’t want to stop him. If anything, he wanted to wiggle free of his clothes and let Hannibal’s hands travel wherever they liked, outside and in.

“May I touch you, Will?” Hannibal breathed, suckling on his earlobe, his heavy sex thrumming just at the suggestion. There was a gentle tease to his tone when he promised, “I swear, I won’t look.”

Will laughed, soft and breathless, back arching in rhythm with each slick brush and pull of Hannibal’s fingers on him. He ached to be suckled, to feel Hannibal’s sharp teeth testing the hardened tips of his chest and sucking away the sting. He knew well enough what Hannibal could wring from him through his clothing, and the thought of his soap slick hands even lower sent a bolt of anticipation through him.

Trembling, he fumbled in the water to undo the fastenings of his pants, eyes closed, silent invitation for Hannibal to touch him without the barrier of cloth between them.

“Will,” Hannibal moaned, folding one arm around him to hold him close while his other hand trailed down Will’s fluttering belly. His eyes swept closed, his senses focusing down on the way Will’s muscles tensed beneath his fingertips, the way the water grew more heated as he reached down.

He found him there, hot and pulsing, a firm length pushing up into his palm through his thin underthings. For a split second Hannibal imagined feeling him through that lace and silk bodysuit and he shuddered hard, his hips rocking in a short, fierce arch against Will’s warm weight.

“I never thought I could feel this,” he said, a soft exhale in Will’s ear, heartfelt and tender. “I touch you and I think I will lose my mind from it, but instead I find my reason.”

“You’re reason for what?” Will asked, breathless and tense as Hannibal’s fingers slid beneath the lip of his underthings. Those sensitive, seeking fingertips brushed his bared, hot head the same moment that Hannibal whispered, “For being.”

Will arched into his hand, biting his lip to hold in the cry that threatened to break from him. He tried to sit up, to contain the fearsome, overwhelming sensation of bare skin sliding over his sensitive sex. Hannibal moved with him, an encompassing strength, shelter in the storm, hot and tight against his body from shoulders to thighs. He cradled Will when he subsided, purring into his ear soft encouragement, peppering him with kisses as he took him in hand.

The soap wore away quickly in the water, but Hannibal’s gentle touch was little better than a milking squeeze, working Will’s aching head and venturing no lower, respectful of the limitations he’d been given.

Hannibal was overwhelmingly delighted Will allowed this much, and marveled at how he felt. He was silky and firm, his skin so fragile that Hannibal scarcely moved his hand for fear of hurting him. He imagined Will would be pink there, a delicate blush like the lining of a shell deepening to ruddy red from friction.

“Your skin is so soft,” he whispered, relishing Will’s panting breaths, short and sharp and indicative of pleasure. “So smooth and hot in my hand.”

Will’s cheeks pinked up but his body gave a lusty pulse, betraying the effect it had on him. His round bottom pushed back, an almost painful pressure against Hannibal’s loose knot and stiff flesh.

“Some day, Will,” he said, half a moan as he imagined it, “I Hope to find out that the rest of you is just as soft, and smooth, and hot.”
“Hannibal,” Will said, his name broken off by a tight clench of teeth as Will tightened, too new to this pleasure to last long beneath Hannibal’s enthusiastic touch. The squeeze of Hannibal’s calloused hand was maddening, a shocking explosion of sensation that couldn’t be contained.

“Especially inside,” Hannibal murmured, shuddering in time with Will as his pleasure broke with force. His slim hips arched against Hannibal’s hand, rocking, and Hannibal drew back with Will in the cup of his groin, his hand gently milking Will’s orgasm from him in racking pulses.

It was too much to withstand, the rocking pressure of his mate’s plump backside wriggling against him coupled with the bliss of bringing him to such a state. It was half pain with the friction of the cloth between them but it overcame Hannibal all the same, gasping in awe as his release spilled out of him in bursts of breathless sensation.

Will gripped the sides of the tub so hard his knuckles blanched white, each breath burning from the effort of keeping quiet as his body peaked and peaked again, greedy for pleasure it had too long been denied.

He felt Hannibal’s hard sex beneath him, felt the veins pulsing in response to his climax and the quiver that ran through him. He rocked with each squeeze of Hannibal’s hand around him, his slick entrance hot and waiting.

It didn’t feel like his heat coloring his judgment when he wanted Hannibal inside him, spearing him open and filling him full, his intimidating knot tying them tight into pleasure.

It felt like something he needed, something they both needed, the natural next step for two people in lo—

He shuddered, the force of his orgasm chasing that unexpected thought away. He slowly relaxed, letting his full weight rest on his husband’s hips as he caught his breath. Hannibal gave him another squeeze to make his breath stutter and trailed his fingers down Will’s sex to cup his sac before sliding back up his belly.

Hannibal shifted to draw Will back down into the water, eyes closed in exquisite pleasure to feel Will pressed to him like a hot little ember. He relished the beauty of it, the joy of giving his mate so much pleasure, a much-needed reprieve from a day too filled with darkness and terror. He wanted to chase it all away, to fill his beautiful mate so full of him Will would dream of being in his arms and not be plagued by nightmares of how things might have gone.

“You beautiful, amazing wonder,” he said, urging Will to turn in his arms, to kiss him, to lay close in the water kept hot by their need for each other. “You priceless, reckless, brilliant Omega.”

Will’s panting slowed, the sharpness of it fading to a throb as he slumped against his husband, pleasantly spent and tender in the aftermath. Hannibal’s praise went straight to his heart, vulnerable as it always was when they were so close and so intimate with one another. It was a balm to old words spoken and unable to be taken back. Acceptance and awe, tenderness and affection, whispered admissions of absolute truth that resonated through their bond.

“My Uncommon and unstoppable wolf,” Hannibal whispered, water sloshing over the tub rim as he pulled Will high in his arms to nestle against his broad chest. “A thousand years of praises would hardly touch the treasure that you are to me, Will.”

Will tipped his head up, his looming heat calming somewhat but still there, still lurking beneath the surface, an unpredictable and unwelcome complication Will wasn’t sure he was ready to deal with, or even how to approach it now.

He kissed his husband instead, a much more pleasant action, a slight shift bringing his muscular thigh up between Hannibal’s legs.

Through their slow, lingering tangle of tongues and lips, he became aware of the firmness resting against his thigh and when they came up for air he angled a look at his husband, brows up.

“I may have gotten a little... overwhelmed,” Hannibal said, his swollen knot pressing to Will’s lovely thigh. “Feeling you come apart for me quite did me in, I’m afraid. In my defense, you do have an uncanny habit of undoing me entirely.”

It was said with a lopsided grin, so full of affection and indulgence Will kissed him again, needing to rely on it, to rely on the unspoken promise Hannibal made with every tender word, every gentle gesture, every protestation of devotion.

“At least it wasn’t my knee,” he teased, nuzzling his nose to Hannibal’s.

“Nonsense, of course it was,” Hannibal protested. “And your incredible thighs and your perfect bottom.”

Will kissed him again, but Hannibal plowed ahead, murmuring between kisses, “And your lower lip is really very dangerous, Will, not to mention those graceful hands of yours. How can a man hope to keep his wits when your waist dips so perfectly into your hips? Aphrodite must weep with jealousy when she catches sight of your calves—”

The kiss was working up to another little bonfire feeding when a firm knock came at the door, startling them both.
They broke apart and Hannibal breathed, “I am going to fire everyone the next time we are interrupted.”

“You won’t either,” Will said, and called, “Yes?”

“Magistrate Crawford is downstairs, my Lords,” Jimmy said, sounding positively gleeful they were both inside the washroom together. “Should I tell him you’re otherwise occupied?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said.

“No, Jimmy, tell him we’ll be down in a little while,” Will corrected, slipping out of Hannibal’s hold. “And if you could fetch a change of clothing for me? Including boots?”

“I certainly can!” Jimmy said, being sure to add, “Including boots, my Lord.”

“Cheeky,” Hannibal growled, his eyes drawn to Will’s backside as he exited the tub, his pants clinging to every delectable curve.

“He’s wonderful and you know it,” Will said, stepping carefully down on the slick, wet floor. “Such a mess we’ve made in here! I feel terrible.”

“Not as terrible as I feel, now,” Hannibal sighed, reaching for a bathing sheet to cover himself as he rose and stepped out of the tub. “Our servants exist to plague me! How can we be so consistently interrupted at such inopportune times?”

“How you do go on,” Will laughed, turning to tuck the end of the sheet up in the lip to keep Hannibal decently covered, though the enormity of his renewed appreciation made that difficult, as Will’s traitorous eyes kept confirming for themselves.

Hannibal captured his hand and kissed his knuckles, then his fingertips before drawing Will’s finger into his mouth for a soft suck, lids dropping to hood his eyes in an expression of perfect, blissful delight.

“I don’t think you’re helping your particular situation,” Will whispered, wiggling his finger against Hannibal’s tongue, half encouragement. He plucked his hand away, feeling another rush of warmth into his belly, a sensual warning not to continue.

“I don’t appear to be helping yours, either,” Hannibal said, smirking when Will took his meaning. His mate’s scent seemed delightfully strong for having just been submerged. Hannibal was certain something was changing in him, considering how faint his scent had always been before. Inspired he might find out for himself the reason why it was, he suggested, “We should sort this out before we go downstairs.”

“There isn’t time,” Will reminded him, the tug and pull of his wet clothing a pleasurable torture against his sensitive skin. He didn’t have to glance down to know how stark and hard his nipples were against his wet white shirt, or how obvious the bulge of his sex was through his wet pants—Hannibal was doing enough ogling for the both of them. “We have to go downstairs.”

“Well, I can’t go down there in this state,” Hannibal pointed out, a little impressed with himself. It certainly did feel like his rut was approaching; that, or Will just roused his libido with unheard of speed, which he felt was entirely likely.

Will considered it for a moment despite how dangerous it was with his heat rearing its ugly head. Wishing it could have been otherwise, he said, “I suppose I’ll have to do something about that, then.”

Hannibal’s brows rose, a slight smile curving his mouth as Will stepped closer. His heart picked up its pace, thundering in his chest fit to deafen him. It pounded even harder when Will stopped before him, barely brushing him, and tipped his beautiful face to breathe into his ear, “Imagine Aunt Margaret just walked in.”

“Will!”

Hannibal scrambled backwards, hands crossed protectively over his groin, an expression of such utter betrayal and horror on his face Will couldn’t keep from chuckling.

“I am very glad you find this amusing!” Hannibal scolded, outraged.

“I do,” Will confirmed, amused even more so when Hannibal cast a mournful glance downwards. “Did it work?”

“Perhaps too well,” Hannibal lamented, his glare not half as fierce as he would’ve liked. “I might never recover from the shock!”

“That would truly be a shame,” Will said, grinning, “since I imagine we will be sharing a bed again at some point, or a tub.”

It had the desired effect of replacing betrayal with hope, and Will warned him, “Don’t think about it too much, or I’ll have to mention—”

“Don’t,” Hannibal warned, holding up a staying hand. “Thank you very much, but once was quite enough to do the job, Will.”
“Then, if you’ll excuse me,” Will said, pleased. “I’m going to wait for Jimmy and change. You’ll need to exit the washroom, Lord Clarges.”

“Don’t go down alone, Will,” Hannibal called, all bantering aside for now. “I have a feeling Jack’s visit will in no way be pleasant. We should be together for it.”

“Of course, Hannibal,” Will said, relieved on that count, and shooed his sheet-wrapped husband out into his bedroom.

Magistrate Crawford stalked the modest parlor of Marsham Heath like a caged bear, lumbering but powerful, with a glower even old Thatcher raised a brow at.

“How did you know?” he asked, pinning Will with his glittering, dark eyes the moment the two of them passed through the doorway.

“Magistrate,” Hannibal said, taking a step forward when Will tensed.

“How did you know?”

He didn’t raise his voice, but he didn’t have to. No softness could hide the measured authority in Jack Crawford, the expectation for instant obedience, be it constable or Lord before him.

“Magistrate Crawford, might I suggest we sit?” Hannibal offered, giving Will time to order his thoughts. He moved to the little sidebar where Mr. Thatcher had thoughtfully provided some fortification and poured Jack a measure.

“I prefer to stand,” Jack said, still watching Will. “I also prefer my questions to be answered when I ask them.”

Will squared his shoulders, his chin tipping up as he faced Magistrate Crawford.

“It made sense,” he said, his hands loose at his sides, reaching for the calm that had never failed him, not in the face of his father’s temper, and certainly not in the face of Magistrate Crawford’s unnerved disbelief.

“You're telling me that the bodies of three of our missing girls being strung up in the Hobbs' smokehouse somehow made sense to you?” Jack asked, the last words holding a bite.

“Magistrate,” Hannibal said, a mild warning as he handed Jack the glass. “You're in our house and my mate is willing to answer your questions. I would appreciate it if you would be cognizant that you are a guest in our home.”

Jack blew out a deep breath, the tension ebbing from his broad shoulders.

“I apologize, Lord Clarges, if I seem abrasive,” he said.

“There is no need to apologize, Magistrate Crawford,” Will said, watching him down his drink. “I understand you are bearing up beneath a good deal of stress. It takes a strong man to do so, especially considering what you've seen. There is little time for niceties with so many unanswered questions.”

Jack lowered his cup, his eyebrows lifting. He cut a glance at Hannibal, who had poured a drink for himself and Will, and said, “You're right, Lord Clarges. His perception is uncanny.”

“He sees a good deal,” Hannibal said, tipping his glass to Will. “It is my advice to never underestimate him.”

Will gave him a taut smile and took the drink, though he did not drink it.

“Out there in the woods,” Jack said, pondering. “Something fell into place for you, didn’t it? What was it? How did you know he was eating them?”

“The bite marks,” Will said, struggling to piece that moment together in a way that would make sense to someone not privy to his thoughts. Hannibal’s hand brushed down his spine in a soothing caress. It settled him and woke a sheen of sweat over his shoulders, but was welcome all the same. “When Hannibal pointed them out, I realized what he was doing.”

“That's a big leap, Lord Clarges,” Jack said, putting his glass down carefully, aware of his own strength with something so delicate. “That could have been part of an assault, or even a large animal.”

“You said yourself there was no prey left, no large predators,” Hannibal reminded him, feeling Will's temperature spike beneath his touch, warm enough it had to be uncomfortable for him.

“Yet his smokehouse ran day and night,” Will said. His blue eyes were sorrowful when they met Jack’s, welling with too much understanding, too many pieces to too many puzzles until the world was a confusing jumble of too much. “Where did the meat come from?”
Jack looked away, mouth bowed down in a frown. Will wondered how many slabs of smoked meat the Crawfords had purchased from the Hobbs family in the past and decided he didn't need to know.

Imagining it was bad enough.

“I never would have thought of such a thing,” Jack admitted, swallowing hard. “I should have guessed. I should have known.”

“There was no way to know,” Hannibal said, sensing his rising agitation.

“He did,” Jack said, angling his head towards Will. “I’m the Magistrate of this town, Lord Clarges. The safety of these people is my responsibility. I should have questioned why there were six padlocks on a smokehouse that ran when no one ever made a kill. Do you know how long those tanning racks sat empty? How was there meat without skins? I should have known.”

“There is no use berating yourself for something that you cannot go back and change,” Will said, finally sipping his drink. “I imagine once the town realizes what has happened, there will be quite enough chaos for you to not go borrowing trouble with regrets, Magistrate.”

“Have you found him?” Hannibal asked, sliding his hand from Will's back to his side, fingers spreading to curve over his hip.

“No,” Jack said, short and abrupt. “He's a woodsman. He knows these forests better than anyone. We've brought in dogs, but he'll know how to confound them. It's a pity you weren't able to disable him, Lord Clarges.”

“Believe me, Magistrate, I have my own regrets from our situation,” Hannibal said, fingers tightening on Will in unconscious response to a remembered threat.

The image of them clashing welled up behind Will's closed lids, Hannibal in fighting fury and the way his earthy scent had deepened to sharp, burning Cedar and musk. He shuddered, the memory of the fight more vivid to him than the moment itself, distracted as he'd been. He felt another flush overcome him, the visceral bloom of his heat reacting to his Alpha's display of dominance.

“But my real question is why,” Jack said, his voice falling to a whisper of horror, confusion evident in his face. “Why would he do this? Why would he seek to destroy the children of people he knew? People who had befriended him and been his neighbors all these years? Why would he turn on his wife and his little girl?”

“Because she's his,” Will said, leaning into Hannibal's touch, needing all the comfort he could get. “Abigail is his, but everyone knew the truth. Hobbs is a barren Alpha, pushed and pushed to make others in his image but unable to. So he made them his own. He had to prove it, he had to show everyone they're his. But he couldn't bear to lose Abigail. He couldn't stand the idea of it...”

His voice grew faint as he wandered into the mind of Garret Jacob Hobbs, making sense of something others would only find grotesque and disturbing. “She's grown, now. She started asking questions. She was going to leave him and he couldn't stand for it. He had to kill her. He had to eat her.”

Jack's eyes widened and he shook his head, his brows drawing together in confusion.

“He eats them,” Will said, hammering his point home, “so he can keep them with him always. They're all his daughters, but they weren't good enough.”

“The other girls,” Hannibal said, trying to draw Jack's piercing attention from his mate, “they were substitutes for Abigail.”

“He killed them so he wouldn't kill her,” Will agreed. “But then we inadvertently escalated the situation by meeting with Louise Hobbs.”

“I don't understand,” Jack said, looking from Will to Hannibal.

“Abigail seems to be under the impression that I am her father,” Hannibal said, noting how Jack drew up in surprise. “We met with Louise to clarify the truth and Hobbs grew frightened on her return.”

“His fear of losing Abigail prompted him to keep her in the most permanent manner he could,” Will said, looking aside, thinking of Louise and what she had sacrificed. “Mrs. Hobbs, as any good and dedicated mother, died trying to save her daughter mere moments before we could arrive.”

“Pardon my prying, my Lords,” Jack said, grim, “but is she your daughter?”

Will drew a touch closer to Hannibal, the two of them presenting a united front as Hannibal said, “She is now.”

Jack cocked his head, eyes narrowing. “Come again?”
“I have written to the Capital,” Will said, Hannibal’s hand a burning brand of pressure against his side. “We are applying for guardianship of Abigail Hobbs.”

“I must respectfully refuse to support that decision,” Jack said.

“On what grounds?” Hannibal asked, frowning.

“On the grounds that Miss Hobbs might have been privy to her father’s activities,” Jack said, pointing out, “She lived in that house. She can’t have been ignorant of what was happening!”

“Jack, that is absolutely vulgar,” Hannibal said, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

“And possible,” Jack said, which Hannibal couldn’t deny.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Will said, stepping away from Hannibal’s touch to put his glass down, his cheeks flushed and his eyes glassy. He looked feverish enough Hannibal searched his face in concern.

“Are you unwell?” he asked, Will’s stronger, sharper scent playing havoc with his senses, his pulse picking up and his skin tightening in response.

“Only in that I refuse to be party to a conversation where a child is being blamed for her father’s crimes,” Will said, moving towards the door. “Abigail Hobbs might even now be dead. That she is alive is a miracle my husband has managed to perform. I can assure you, I will not let her life be dictated once again by another man in a position of power over her. Good evening.”

He did not slam the door behind him, but Hannibal knew he wouldn’t. The angrier Will was, the more careful he became, the more barbed his words were, and the more cutting his observations.

“My husband makes an excellent point,” Hannibal said, abandoning his drink. “Abigail’s complicity in her father’s crimes is moot.”

“Complicity is never a moot point,” Jack said, glowering. “If she helped him—”

“Then I am positive she did not do so by choice,” Hannibal said, holding his eye. “Which is precisely what my husband realizes. Hobbs was dangerous, clearly violent. If Abigail had any hand in what was happening, it may have been due to her fear of being harmed. He certainly didn’t hesitate to hurt her. He nearly sliced her throat. Those are not the actions of a loving father.”

“No, but they are the actions of a man eliminating his accomplice,” Jack said, dogged in his determination.

“Or a witness,” Hannibal suggested.

Jack subsided, aggravated and uneasy again with no one to punish for the murders that had occurred.

“I want to speak to her.”

“That isn’t possible,” Hannibal said. “She is suffering from a very serious injury and is heavily sedated.”

“Tomorrow, then—”

“Jack,” Hannibal said, shaking his head. “I didn’t save Abigail’s life to watch her hang in her father’s place.”

Jack subsided but it was clear he would not let the issue drop.

“The lives of those girls will be remembered,” Hannibal said. “Their families will have the peace of knowing justice was served when Hobbs dangles at the end of a rope for what he has done, or else is killed by one of your men. But Abigail… Jack, haven’t enough children died in Moseley?”

Jack considered him for a long, silent moment before he quietly asked, “Can you live with her being a killer, Lord Clarges?”

Hannibal frowned. “I have learned, Jack, that it is far easier to sit in judgment of something you have no understanding of than it is to see the world through another’s eyes. I will do my best to see the world through Abigail’s and help her find her way out of the dark woods her father has hidden her in. I can help her find her way forward. That is something I can live with, Jack.”

“I certainly hope so,” Jack said, his eyes flicking upwards as if seeking her out through the floor. “And I certainly hope if she is a killer, you don’t find out the hard way by losing one of your own children, Lord Clarges. Gods know Moseley has lost enough for us all.”

***
Will was trembling by the time he got upstairs and let himself into his suite to check on Abigail, still flushed with irritation at Jack’s suggestion.

One of the house maids was sitting with Abigail, working on some darning in a bedside chair with Winston curled up at her feet. She began to stand when he entered but Will stayed her with a gesture, moving to block Winston from sniffing him.

“Has she stirred?” Will asked, looking at Abigail’s sleep-slackened face. He didn’t envy what she faced when she finally woke, but he was determined he and Hannibal would help her recover from her losses. Jack Crawford wasn’t going to punish her for her father’s sins. Abigail Hobbs had survived against all odds and she deserved to have a chance to live without another threat hanging over her head.

“Not a bit, m’Lord,” he was told. “But we turned her some, as his Lordship said.”

“Good,” Will said, relieved. He pushed Winston’s nose down again with a sharp look that quelled the dog’s curiosity. He felt another wash of warmth on him, his skin sheening in sweat, his clothes suddenly too small and itchy. He tugged at his neckerchief and moved to ring for Jimmy, telling her, “Thank you, Emily. Please, continue as you were.”

He took Winston and went out onto the landing to catch Jimmy on his way up. Night was falling, the sky a ruby red fading to dark velveteen blue beyond the hallway window. Another day closing, another night ahead, and a weighty decision on his head he did not feel able to make alone.

Light appeared at the far end of the hall, Jimmy Price carrying a little lamp to pick his way through the darkness and the residual mess the workers had left behind. He caught sight of Will and said, “My Lord! What on earth are you doing out here? Hello, Winston.”

“Jimmy,” Will said, and hesitated. He moved to Hannibal’s door and opened it, saying, “I’m having a bit of a crisis and I need your help.”

“Oh, my Lord, you know how handy I am in a crisis!” Jimmy said, following him inside and lighting lamps as he went, turning them up to fend off the darkness. “Now, what can I do for you?”

Will swiped at his forehead, shifting and uncomfortable in his heavy clothing. Jimmy turned when he didn’t get a response and his smile faded.

“Oh,” he said, putting the lamp down in an empty bracket. He went to the washroom and wet a cloth, wringing it out. He brought it to Will, who slumped down on Hannibal’s bed with a sigh.

“Thank you,” Will said, pressing it to his face and drawing a deep breath, a shudder overtaking him. He wiped his face with one hand, unresisting as Jimmy began to undo his buttons. “I should have realized it was happening, I’ve been so snappish and impulsive. It shouldn’t have taken me by surprise.”

“With so much going on, my Lord,” Jimmy said, his smile putting Will at ease, “I’m not surprised. Close calls have a tendency to make us want some reassurance, after all. Your ordeal today just pushed you when you weren’t expecting it.”

Jimmy stripped him down to his shirt and loosened his cuffs and collar before stepping back to tend to his clothes. Will wiped his feverish skin, his mind shying away from the memories of Hannibal rising to his defense, from the tub and his soft words. Every moment of quiet, shared pleasure returned to plague him, stoking a fire in his belly nothing could quench except his mate.

Jimmy went through the washroom into Will’s suite, quietly so as not to disturb Abigail’s rest, and when he returned he had Will’s nightclothes and dressing gown in hand.

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will breathed, tipping his head back at the sensation of cool air on his skin when he shed his clothes. The valet gave him a prompt, profession wipe down with the cool cloth to chase his sweat away before dressing him. The nightshirt was light as air as Jimmy eased it over his head, falling nearly to his calves. The dressing gown quickly covered it, tied with precise snugness. Will declined the house shoes, spreading his toes against the woven rug and testing the texture on his skin.

That accomplished, Jimmy began to pick up, saying, “Don’t worry, my Lord, we are never unprepared. Mr. Thatcher has assured me this house stands at the ready to keep you in comfort during your time.”

“You inquired?” Will asked, uncertain if he should feel relieved or appalled.
“Naturally!” Jimmy informed him, Will’s clothing draped over one arm. “I could hardly serve you at my best if I’m caught unawares! Both the Duke and Duchess suites are proofed for sound, so you needn’t worry for privacy. It will take me no time at all to prep the bed.”

“Jimmy,” Will said, staying his movement. “I can’t turn Hannibal out of his own bed.”

“Beg your pardon?” Jimmy asked, shaking his head, confusion creeping into his smile. “I’m sorry to pry, my Lord, but I assumed you would be spending this time with your husband.”

“We’ve never discussed it,” Will admitted, reality settling on him. “I had hoped we would be back at Hartford at the time where I could handle this quietly without his knowing. This is an unexpected complication.”

“Do you want to spend your heat with him?” Jimmy asked, trying to understand.

“I think under other circumstances I would,” Will said, sitting down on the bed to stroke Winston, who whined with unease. “Since his return, Hannibal has been everything I ever dreamed of in a mate. Sharing this time with him should be something precious.”

He thought of Hannibal holding him, marking him, purring with pleasure just to touch him and be touched in return. They came together with urgency and awe—surely not all of that was Nature making them foolish?

“I want to be with him,” Will said, barely able to speak it aloud. He took a deep breath, a shudder coursing through him when he considered the implications. “I think of what we’ve shared so far, the things we’ve done, and then I think of the heats I’ve had...”

“You fear it will change how he sees you,” Jimmy said, his sympathy and understanding bringing tears to Will’s eyes.

“He thinks I am a treasure,” Will said, smiling as he thought of his husband’s murmured praise, “as silly as that sounds to say. He calls me brilliant, Jimmy. He says such incredible things to me and he means them. He means them.”

He turned his head to look at his longtime friend and asked in a whisper, “What if my heat makes him see something he cannot accept? Something repulsive? Sickenning? What if he realizes what he thinks I am isn’t true? He says I am myself, and that is all I need to be, but there is every possibility my growing heat has been clouding his vision of me all this time—”

“Lord Clarges,” Jimmy said, his voice firm. “It doesn’t work that way.”

Will stilled, confusion shrouding him, his hand falling still in Winston’s ruff.

“Listen,” Jimmy said, his tone capturing Will’s full attention. “I can’t claim to know what you were told, but I do know it was very little. I had hoped these past years you would learn through the heats you experienced that it doesn’t make you some kind of mindless doll and it isn’t some type of... lust potion that addles Alphas’ brains!”

Jimmy reached out and grasped his hand, holding it firmly, earnest when he said, “My Lord, what Nature has given you is a gift meant to be shared, not a yoke meant to bind either one of you. I hate to think you’re so disturbed by something intended to honor you.”

It calmed Will’s nerves somewhat, gave him a tiny corner from which to fortify himself and reach for objectivity.

“I have seen a thing or two in my time, Lord Clarges,” Jimmy said, smiling at him with fond affection, “but I can honestly say I have never seen a man look at his spouse the way Lord Clarges looks at you.”

Will smiled, squeezing Jimmy’s hand in return, still stroking Winston’s fuzzy ears.

“It’s your decision,” Jimmy said, letting him go to pat the clothes on his arms. “Would you like me to make up the room? A few of the girls are still here; we can have the bedding tended in a trice.”

“Yes, Jimmy, thank you,” Will said, nodding. He retreated to sit near the fire with Winston while the bed was made up, glistening with sweat as the oilcloth was put down to spare the mattress proper, then covered with a downy pad before the bed was remade with clean sheets and blankets.

He thought of himself in that bed bared to Hannibal’s eyes, finally waltzing the dance Nature had invented so long ago. Another flush washed over him, the throb of his heat growing stronger, a second heartbeat in his belly ripe with promise. His bond to Hannibal was a warm coil of flesh around him, pulsing with strength that urged his heat to rise with every breath.

“There we are,” Jimmy said, behaving with routine efficiency, focused on taking care of his charge. He shooed the maids out and came to Will, telling him, “I’ll have Cook make up a tray for your dinner and I’ll be up in a little while with some cold water for you. You just get comfortable, my Lord, and let us take care of you.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will said, shivering. He smiled when Jimmy impulsively leaned down and hugged him.
“It’s going to be okay, my Lord,” he said, drawing back to pat his cheek. “You deserve to be happy. We all want that for you more than anything.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will said again, moved by his valet’s dedication.

“I’ll just take this fellow here,” Jimmy said, moving to grasp Winston’s collar, “so he won’t be a nuisance. He can bed down with one of the stable lads for a spell. Ring me when you need me, my Lord. I’ll have the kitchen staff keep the boilers fired so you can bathe when you need to.”

He left, then, taking Winston with him to leave Will alone with his thoughts, shivering and too hot as his heat gained momentum.

Will got to his feet, the familiar weight in his nethers dragging at him as he stood. He tried to drown himself in memories of Hannibal’s smiles, in his gentle touch, in his words and promises to make it up to him, all of it, to erase the pain of their past as if it had never been. This could heal so many old wounds, coming together as they longed to do.

It hurt him, his yearning for his Alpha a physical pain. Everything in him urged him to rely on his husband, to trust that the awe in his touch was the truth, that the hunger which gripped Hannibal and made him greedy for Will was as unspoiled and spontaneous as Will’s own growing desire to connect to his husband in every imaginable way.

‘Weak and needy and only good for whorehouses...’

Hannibal’s words were a whisper from their past, a quiet and insidious doubt reaching up from the darkest part of Will’s memories. They returned to him in his father’s voice, mocking and cruel and fierce in their certainty. Memories of six years ago warned him to caution, begging him to step away from the cliff’s edge and the plunge it promised.

Will pushed those thoughts away but they niggled at his resolve, drawing on his doubts. He imagined Jimmy downstairs on his way to the stables, relaying the situation in low tones to Mr. Berger. He imagined Berger waiting for the Magistrate to leave, nervous to unburden himself to the man he had served for so long.

He had a long wait on his hands, he knew, before Hannibal would arrive. He moved to the window to distract himself, looking out where night had fallen to pure darkness. Stars had emerged from their shy repose, baring themselves in their glory without fear or shame.

He wished he could be so bold, wished the spirit of the Courtier would reclaim him and allow him to shuck off this strange unease like a robe of chains. It would be so easy, he knew. Just flinging his inhibitions to the wind, shedding his clothing like so much unwanted weight, and throw his arms wide for his husband—

‘And be the whore he once called you?’

Will flinched against the image that came with the thought, all the respect and regard Hannibal had gained for him slowly leaching away to horror.

Will shoved the window pane open, allowing a cool breeze to flow in, and closed his eyes as it played over his damp skin, all imaginings of sharing that bed with Hannibal as a married couple smothered beneath heat-fueled nerves.

Perhaps it would be best if he didn’t inconvenience his husband with something neither one of them was comfortable with. Hannibal’s willingness to be loving towards him was not permission to embroil him in Will’s heat. His desire for Will did not preclude the possibility that something so... Omegan might be too kin to his previously-held beliefs for his comfort.

It would be best for them both not to suffer through this ugliness together. There had been ample opportunities for Hannibal to discreetly make it known he would like to be involved in Will’s heat, but he had never mentioned it, as if such a possibility didn’t exist. It was possible it still disgusted him, the idea of it so unsavory he could not bring himself to discuss it. There was every chance Hannibal would be relieved by his decision, glad Will was not an Omega who demanded his attention, thankful Will would not reduce him to a stud in service to a broodmare, as his father had always deemed such things.

The only way for either one of them to emerge from this with their dignity intact was to pretend it wasn’t happening. When Hannibal came to him, he would explain himself and other arrangements could be made. They would move past the next few days and pick up where they left off with Hannibal’s understanding of him unsullied by the sordid truth his father had always known was there. He would spend his heat alone, as he had the others.

It would be quiet.

It would be routine.

It would be lonely, as it always was.
“Stop,” he hissed, clenching his teeth. His flushed skin broke out in another fine sweat, warning him this heat would be much more aggressive than any he’d had before it. Perhaps even more aggressive than his first, much as he shuddered to think of it.

Hannibal’s image came to him unbidden along with the sense-memory of his Alpha scent. Will knew Hannibal had been responding to his heat without realizing it, his own Alpha pheromones strengthening in reaction, a cycle of pressure neither one of them was aware of.

“It doesn’t matter,” Will whispered to himself, closing his eyes against the memory of Hannibal’s patrician, handsome face and amused smile. His heart raced despite it, his breath coming in short bursts as his body softened and grew wet in anticipation of something Will knew it would not be getting. “It’s just touch hunger, that’s all. It will fade. It always does.”

Determined, Will squared his shoulders and returned to the door, sliding the latch into place. It was token, he knew. Hannibal could easily let himself through their shared washroom to reach him.

But he wouldn’t do that. He would respect Will’s intention. He would listen with his usual attentiveness, accept Will’s decision, and leave for the Capital, perhaps. Absent himself somehow to spare them both any embarrassment.

Disappointment washed over Will, lifting tears to his eyes again, all of his anticipation overtaken by doubts. He leaned against the panel before turning to slump down on the floor in the soft lamplight. He tucked his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around them, knowing it would only be a matter of time before the pulse became pain, before the warmth became a raging inferno, before he would undeniably show he was something he had denied for years.

*Omegan.*

Hannibal spent a good chunk of time discussing the arrangements Will had made for the families of the victims and for the body of Mrs. Hobbs. He was pleasantly surprised to find that his mate had also sent copies of their wishes and a report of his findings to the Magistrate’s office while he was fighting to save Abigail’s life.

He was once again filled with delight in his husband and looked forward to the teasing promise Will had made to chase his nightmares away.

After the day they’d had, they both would need it.

He moved towards the stairs with the vague intentions of checking on Abigail, expecting to find Will at her bedside. He caught Will’s sugary scent lingering in the air, a faint trace of something riding in the deeper tone of his fragrance flooding Hannibal’s veins with sudden warmth.

He’d been slowly becoming aware of that fevered sweetness for some time, but he hadn’t understood what it was telling him until that moment, when it hit him with the equivalent of a slap to his hind-brain.

*Heat.*

His mate was ripening into his heat, and every nuance of his scent seemed to scream it.

Hannibal tipped his head, Will’s scent strengthening with every breath, the familiar sweetness overcome with feverish warmth, the missing note to the bouquet of his mate’s hallmark fragrance.

The stronger it got, the harder his heart beat and the warmer he felt. He blamed it on the primitive instincts of being an Alpha but it was more primal than primitive, a drive to find the source of what drew him, to wrap that scent and its source in his own protective warmth and keep him safe.

“My Lord,” Berger said, coming towards him with a hangdog expression of acute concern on his weathered face. “There’s somethin’ Price says you need to know. It’s his Lordship, m’Lord—”

“I know,” Hannibal said, swallowing hard, the tip of his tongue wetting his suddenly dry lips. “I know what it is, Berger.”

“Price says he’s shut up in your suite, m’Lord,” Berger said, his concern intensifying. “He said to tell you that his Lordship is skittish as a fawn and you need to listen to him.”

“I always listen to him,” Hannibal said, bemused.

Berger’s meaning penetrated the haze of awareness Will’s scent had wrapped him in. Concerned, he asked, “Berger, are you saying Will would prefer I don’t join him?”
"No, not that, I just think he's a mite scared, m'Lord," Berger said, wringing his hands. "And the past weighs on him heavier for the way his memory works."

"I am aware of how his memory works, Berger, trust me," Hannibal said, vast disappointment washing over him. "None of the maids bed down in the house?"

Berger shook his head and Hannibal nodded. "Then make up one of the empty rooms for me, just in case. Does he have everything he needs?"

It was Berger's turn to nod. He looked on the cusp of tears, and Hannibal knew he was doing a poor job of hiding how deeply the outcome of Will's decision affected him.

But it was his to choose. It was always his to choose, and the day Hannibal stopped respecting that was the day he would remove himself from Will entirely, a fitting exile for someone unworthy of Will's company.

"Thank you, Berger," he said, turning to mount the stairs. "Please, inform the staff to keep clear of our suite. I expect Mr. Price knows what's to be done."

The door to his suite was a faint outline in the dark, the low lamplight within leaving a bare seam of light beneath. He moved to the door and gingerly tried the handle, which was locked.

"Everything is prepared," Will said, his voice thinned by the width of the door but Hannibal could tell he was just there, perhaps like himself leaning his head against the wood. He lifted his hand and touched the panel, wishing that he could reach Will as easily as he could open the door before him.

But it wasn't that easy.

Will wasn't that easy.

"I know," he said, pitching his voice low. "Berger told me."

There was a short silence, the soft brush of something against the door followed by Will saying, "You don't have to stay, Hannibal. I'm not asking that of you."

Hannibal frowned and closed his eyes, picturing Will there on the other side, small and poised and flushed, ensuring Hannibal could leave as quickly as possible with minimal trouble. Always thinking of others, always trying to save himself because he could not trust anyone to help him, or care for him, or need him enough to try to understand him.

Hannibal trembled with the need to hold him, to chase away his doubts, to draw Will around him as surely as that scent and drive every doubt from his curly-haired head.

His nostrils flared as Will's scent strengthened. His lips parted, pulling the flavor across his teeth and tongue, tasting the burn that was his mate, the fire of it finer than any liquor from anywhere in the world. It was uniquely Will, smoky with heat, with a sharp tang that made Hannibal reflexively swallow, his mouth watering, a balm to his very soul.

He slowly slid down to sit on the floor next to the door, his back to the wall, elbows propped on his bent knees, and he waited.

He listened to the soft sounds of the house around him, staff puttering about getting dinner prepared. He listened to the slight shift of Will's trim body against the door. He imagined he could hear Will's heart beating, the rush of blood through his veins pushing his heady scent to the surface.

It seemed hours passed before Will's soft voice finally broke the stillness again.

"You truly don't have to stay, Hannibal."

Hannibal tipped his head back against the door frame and said, "You are my husband, Will. My place is with you."

Will said nothing. Hannibal's thick Alpha scent teased over his tongue like a caress, a palm pressing down against the aching throb of his heat. He chased it, desperate for even such a slight relief.

"Will," Hannibal said, blinking in the darkness. "Why are you hiding yourself from me?"

Will closed his eyes, too fragile to fight any more after fighting for so long. His voice was barely better than a whisper when he admitted, "Because I'm a coward, Hannibal. I've come to value your opinion of me."

The admission pained him, scalded him down to his core. Weakness, the simpering of an Omega who couldn't stand to cross their Alpha.
“As I value your opinion of me,” Hannibal said, head lolling against the wall. If he hadn’t been straining to hear, he might not have heard Will speak at all, testament to the room’s proofing for just this instance. “Will... why would you not tell me your heat was coming due?”

“Because it isn’t due,” Will said, faint reproach in his voice. “I think perhaps being in such close company with you has turned things about a bit. I had hoped it would hold off and I could deal with it at Hartford without involving you.”

Hannibal’s face pulled taut in a spasm of displeasure. His voice was a husky purr that seemed to vibrate through the door when he asked, “You prefer not to involve me in your heat?”

“I would prefer not to involve either one of us,” Will said with a husky laugh. “It’s inconvenient and troublesome. I, unfortunately, cannot avoid it, but I needn’t drag you into it. In a few days things can be as they were and neither of us will see the other in a shameful state.”

“A shameful state,” Hannibal echoed, his heart sinking. He should have known Will would think such a thing, indoctrinated as he’d been by a vicious Alpha and baptized in Hannibal’s own unwholesome opinions when he’d been so terribly ignorant.

“Yes,” Will said, sounding resolved when he was anything but. “Since your return, things have been different between us. You treat me in such a way I could never ask for better. You look at me and smile at me like I’m the most... the most amazing thing you’ve ever seen.”

Hannibal’s brow furrowed. He leaned closer to the seam of the closed door, holding his breath to better hear his mate.

“I can’t bear to see you look at me the way you did before you abandoned me, Hannibal,” Will breathed, drawing a shaky breath, “like I’m hateful... like I’m ... something that shouldn’t exist... a construct of meager appeal housing a vapid, empty mind and lack of true purpose outside of getting bedded.”

Hannibal flinched, the sting in his heart matched only by the sting behind his closed lids.

“You want a partner in life, not something else that demands more of your attention than you can spare,” Will reminded him, hugging himself so hard it hurt, but no one could see it. No one would know how weak he’d let himself become. He could hide here, wait it out, and put it all behind him, as he always did, with no one the wiser. “What’s happened between us in the last few weeks isn’t something I’m willing to risk ruining with this ugliness. This will pass and you will be glad I acted in our best interests. I will not encumber you with my demands, Hannibal. I am not what you thought I was and I will not let you see me in a state that can only repulse you.”

It cut deep into his heart to hear Will say such a thing, to know his own words and actions had caused his mate to shroud himself from him, to shield them both from the potential of his response.

“I cannot fault you for closing the door against me. Your entire life you’ve been coached to believe your instincts are flawed, that your nature will betray you, that your needs are inconvenient and your wants inconsequential,” Hannibal said, his voice strained and low. “But what you have been taught is wrong, Will. Your instincts are flawless and your nature is unblemished. Your needs and your wants are my foremost desire to satisfy, as a man and as your mate. What has grown between us is genuine and you know it as well as I do, just as we both know I owe my fair share of the blame in influencing your decision.”

It was Will’s fear of having his happiness taken away that was driving him to retreat to a place where the truth wouldn’t hurt him again, where he wasn’t vulnerable. He needed to protect himself.

And Hannibal needed to protect him.

“I cannot imagine how I could ever have been so blind as to ever look at you in such a way,” Hannibal whispered, his fingers running along the floorboard, finding the gap beneath the door and curling up under it. He could feel the warmth of Will’s body there, close enough to touch, but he made no move to do so. “I have no excuse to offer you for what I said to you, Will, nor for how I treated you. I remember every second of it.”

“So do I,” Will murmured, his gaze fixing on Hannibal’s fingers there, curved up against the wood. Well-tended nails, long, fine fingers, every inch of him patrician while Will was just... Will.

“Why did you come to me that night?” Hannibal asked. With his eyes closed, he could imagine they were sitting together, perhaps in the garden at Hartford by moonlight, with no Matthew Brown or Mason Verger or Garret Jacob Hobbs waiting to
rip Will away from this world, with no conniving Mina making strife between them. Just he and his mate, side by side in the night and the sky lit up with stars like sparkling jewels above them.

“Grandfather insisted,” Will whispered, shivering with remembered shame. “He said I had to try. What else was I to do?”

“There was nothing else you could do,” Hannibal breathed, gripping the bottom of the door tightly. “You were friendless in an unfamiliar place and someone with more status, age, and wisdom than you instructed you to fling yourself on my mercy. I wish I had known.”

“Would it have changed the outcome, Hannibal?” Will asked, wiping at his forehead. He could feel it gaining strength again despite the oddly comforting suppression Hannibal’s scent offered.

“I would like to think so,” Hannibal said. “There is no way to know now. I thought you had schemed it on your own, desperate to secure your place. I imagined you had lived to that point being told every minute of your life how beautiful you are, how lucky your Alpha would be, how quickly and easily you would get whatever your heart desired by just crooking your little finger for it. I thought you armed as a knight in your confidence, Will, and I attacked in my own, little knowing how one-sided a match it was.”

Will swallowed against a lump in his throat, resisting those soft words and the memories of that night.

“I was determined to deny you everything I imagined you sought to take away from me,” Hannibal quietly said, his heart heavy. “I built forts and dug moats and coiled about my hoard like a dragon. I wish I had known then what I know now. How different our lives would have been.”

Will’s head came up and he shivered, yet he could not keep himself from asking, “What do you know now, Hannibal?”

“That all you wanted was a place to call home,” Hannibal whispered. “A place where you belong, a family that loves and respects you. Such a small thing to some, such a small thing to ask, it should never have been in question.”

Will ground his wrist against his eyes, fighting the aching tears that threatened. With a soft, scornful laugh to cover his upset, he said, “It was too much to ask of a stranger, too much to hope for after all.”

“The gods betrayed you to my hands,” Hannibal said. “I stood you in place of one beyond my reach and I burned you in her stead. You paid the price for my ignorance, just as you did for your father. I have promised you I would make it up to you, Will. I have promised I will dedicate my life to you, and you know as well as I do our attachment is no small thing.”

Will wiped at his face, half sweat and half tears.

“If it takes the rest of my life, I will never stop trying, Will,” Hannibal reminded him. “You have a place to belong. You have a home. Your place is with me and our home is one another. The family that loves and respects you is ours together.”

Will blinked rapidly, head falling back against the door, Hannibal’s words resonating within him as surely as the bond.

“Every part of you is precious to me, Will. Every aspect of you is the treasure I hoard, reaching for Will with something less tangible than touch but no less powerful. “When I touch you, I do so from my honest desire to feel you with my senses, to satisfy my greed for everything about you.”

Tears rolled down Will’s face, the fluttering in his heart swelling up to choke him.

“What has sprung to life between us is not the machinations of Nature, Will,” Hannibal said, insistent that Will would not mistake him. “Neither one of us would ever be led about by the nose against our will, we are far too stubborn for it. To dismiss it as such is to tarnish the truth of it.”

“And what truth is that?” Will asked, the thickness in his voice making Hannibal’s eyes mist in response, the ache to hold him and soothe him almost stealing his breath.

“That I care for you, deeply so,” he whispered, knowing Will heard him. “That we touch because we are drawn together, pulled to each other through mutual fascination and regard. There is nothing about you which could ever dissuade me from wanting to spend every moment the gods grant me with you, Will, even to my last breath.”

Will took a breath in the silence, trembling. He wiped his face, feeling Hannibal’s honesty through his bond. He searched in vain for any sign that his heat was clouding his thinking but found none.

What was happening simply was, as Jimmy had tried to tell him.

“It is always yours to choose, Will,” Hannibal said, his husky voice strained with emotion. “If you tell me to go, I will go. If you allow me to stay, I will stay, Will. To share this moment with you, to discover together the beauty of its promise, it is more
than I deserve, considering how I have treated you in the past. You should have a far better man as your mate, Will, but I will give you everything in me without hesitation."

“Why should you, Hannibal?” Will asked, heart skipping in his chest, the remnants of his crumbling resistance prompting him to ask, “Pity?”

“No, never,” Hannibal said, almost before the word left Will's lips. “Tribute. There is an altar at your feet that has lain bare too long.”

Will flinched, taking a breath that caught at the edges, where everything wavered and trembled so dangerously.

“I have done unspeakable things to you, Will, through no fault of your own,” Hannibal breathed. “It would be a good start to begin by making an offering.”

Will frowned, the husky timbre of Hannibal's voice vibrating down his spine to the pit of his stomach, a soft spread of warmth that teased at his heat. “Are you thumbing your nose at Fate, Hannibal?”

“I believe, for the first time in my life, Will, I am offering to embrace it,” Hannibal said, straining for any reaction from the other side of that closed door. Softly, cautiously, he ventured, “What does your heart desire, Will?”

Will was silent for a long moment, weighing the moment against his uncertain future, against his unkind past and the hope that would always cripple him with promises it would never, ever keep, however sweet his present had been.

“I want to see you, Hannibal,” he murmured, straining to blame it on his heat but knowing it was only an excuse, a ready explanation for decisions he was too nervous to claim responsibility for.

What he asked was entirely his own, what he had always wanted, what he always would want, “I want you to see me.”

He trembled in the wake of it, breathless and braced for his father to be right after all, for his fears to be realized, for the happiness he yearned for to be snatched from him the moment he dared to reach, always the moment he dared to reach.

“Past the hard edges of a child taught from the cradle he birthed his own misfortune,” Hannibal said, loosening his fingers. “Through the mirror of your Gift and the armor of your determination to find the man within?”

“I am neither a man,” Will said, his hand falling, reaching, hovering over Hannibal's lax fingers, “nor a woman. I am only myself. I want you to see me as I am, however ugly it may be, and still say I am your treasure... your reason for being.”

Hannibal stilled, feeling the faint brush of Will's fingers over his own, a touch charged with purpose, with hesitance. With hope.

“You will always be my reason for being, Will. All I ever ask is that you are yourself. What you fear I will find ugly, I can assure you I will find indescribably beautiful, as every part of you is beautiful to me,” Hannibal said, breath hitching when those warm, gentle fingertips touched his own, softly, faintly, a cobweb of sensation, the tickle of a butterfly's wings. “May I see you, Will?”

Will traced the tips of Hannibal's fingers, considering, his slumberous heat stretching within him. His answer was pulled from his lips like caramel, sticky and sweet.

“Yes.”

Hannibal shivered, heart thumping hard, and said, “Then unlock the door.”

Chapter 35

The click of the latch was loud in the silence that followed, a slight screech of oiled metal on metal and a solid snap as it was drawn into its catch. The door swung inwards a crack and Hannibal swallowed reflexively as Will's scent strengthened, swirling around him in a blanket of warm air.

Will was a black silhouette framed by the window beyond, his curls a halo of firelight-tinged softness. He didn’t stir or even breathe, as if bracing for something awful to come as it had so often in the past.

“May I come in?” Hannibal asked, his words a low, throaty throb of sound.

Will considered before he nodded, a slow gesture becoming decisive as he stepped back, offering entrance to his husband and his distracting Alpha scent.

Hannibal closed the door behind him and leaned on it, gazing at Will in all of his diffident glory.
No knight in full armor or King in royal vestments could match the effortless dignity and grace of Will Lecter-Graham barefoot in his dressing gown. From the unruly mop of his curls to the swan-like length of his neck all the way down to the tips of his toes, he was every inch a marvel in his husband's eyes.

The smell of Will's heat lay thick on Hannibal's tongue, pouring in through his mouth and nose to fill him up with longing. He swallowed reflexively, testing and tasting it, every breath notching his pulse up. The Alpha in him swelled in response, a weighty drag in his groin as his whole being responded. His skin was hot, overly sensitive, attuned to every small movement of Will's body. He felt an overwhelming urge to go to him, to run his hands over the scent glands beneath his jaw, to stroke and soothe the heated nape of his neck, to sink his teeth into fevered flesh and lay a mark for all to see.

He shifted, weak with just the thought of it, a rough, coaxing chuff escaping him.

Will closed his eyes, the low sound purring through him with delighted approval, the resonance of Hannibal's Alpha voice tingling down his spine. His skin tightened, the fine hairs on his arms and nape lifting on a flush, another pulse of wet want pooling between his thighs. His bond to Hannibal clamored loudly enough to drown out the desperate voices of the past which sought to intrude, leaving him with too few restraints on his hunger to be safe. He looked to one side, uncertain now what to do, but secure in the knowledge he could send him away if he wanted to and Hannibal would dutifully go.

But he didn't want to send him away. He didn't want him to go.

He would give Hannibal this chance and if he walked away, if he hurt him again, it would be the last time in their lives he would ever do so. He would make his decision and never look back, however much it hurt him.

Will opened his eyes, gazing at Hannibal through the shield of his thick lashes, a shiver coursing through him when their eyes met. There was so much need in him—to be loved, to be cherished, to be touched with the reverence and awe he deserved. It was an invitation, one which Hannibal couldn't resist.

He eased away from the door and came to Will, his tanned skin burning bronze. Firelight played over his high cheekbones, caught in licking flames in his amber eyes. The intensity Will saw there might have goaded him to bristle a month before, not understanding the source, but now he knew why his husband looked at him that way. He only hoped, when all was said and done, Hannibal would still look at him as if he was a gift from the gods themselves.

Hannibal stopped just before him, the musk of his Alpha scent curling out like the brush of fingers over Will's instincts, chasing a shiver down his skin. His whole body relaxed on a sigh to have Hannibal's rich perfume eddying around him, a heady tribute to his husband's eager appreciation.

Almost cautiously, Hannibal moved closer, bodies barely brushing, close enough that when he lifted his chin, the barest tilt of Will's head plunged his nose into his husband's scent. The flavor of it filled him with desire, such ripe, rampant fertility pouring straight through him to his groin.

Hannibal shuddered when the tip of Will's tongue darted out to touch his throat, lapping at his skin, a light, tickling tease he responded to with gusto. There was no denying the urge to scent his mate in return, to mingle them into one perfume that would tell the world they were united, one force into two bodies.

But not two for much longer, not if Will would allow it. For the rest of his heat they would be one, and Hannibal's heart swelled with emotion to even think of it.

He grasped Will's heated cheeks and urged his head back to bare the length of his beautiful throat, gentle with him. He found the places where his scent lay strongest and rubbed his teeth over them, moaning to taste Will's sweetness on his tongue. His fingers splayed over Will's jaw, a jolt of need rocking him when Will turned his head just a fraction, just enough to find Hannibal's fingertip with his lips and suck.

“Will,” he breathed, abandoning caution, dropping his other hand to Will's waist to pull him in tight. He lifted his head, sliding his finger from Will's mouth to claim those plump lips with his own.

The ache sharpened, feeding on itself with each whisper of lips, each stroke of soft tongues. Will clutched at him, strong hands gripping Hannibal's shoulders in welcome, his kisses so hungry and so fierce Hannibal felt he could be sustained by nothing more than his husband's passion.

He broke the kiss, resting forehead to forehead, panting hard and trembling. Will's lashes brushed his skin with each flick of his eyes, but his hands never loosened, as if he feared to let Hannibal go.
“I was so afraid you would send me away,” Hannibal whispered, dragging his teeth up Will's stubborn chin in a teasing nip. The tremble that coursed through Will's slender body was echoed in his own, the pressure a maddening tease of possibilities.

Will wet his lips, his words a husky whisper when he said, “I want you here. I want you, Hannibal.”

His blue gaze caught and held Hannibal's own, heady with intent. There would be conversations later, they both knew; time to find and heal old wounds, but in this moment words were the least of what Will wanted from him. He wanted the touch he'd been denied for the last six years, confirmation Hannibal's praise was not empty and he truly needed him in just the insatiable way that he claimed to.

And he did. Oh, he did, and shuddered as Will's fingers skimmed from his shoulders to his neckerchief in a tickling brush. He tugged at the cloth to loosen it, but stilled when Hannibal reached up to grasp his wrists.

Will felt as dainty in that moment as Hannibal imagined him with the delicate bones of his wrists trapped in his mate's powerful hands. He wet his lips, almost moaning when Hannibal drew his hands to his mouth.

Hannibal kissed each fingertip in turn, his hot tongue coiling about Will's well-tended nails in a soft suck until he reached the last. With a weighty gleam in his amber eyes, he breathed, “Please, allow me.”

He eased Will's hands down and began to unknot his neckerchief, decisive but slow movements that bared him to his husband's glittering eyes.

Will watched him with a hammering heart, a gift being unwrapped before him in a slow reveal of skin and strengthening scent that made his mouth water and his knees go weak. Hannibal wasn't the only greedy one, Will found. His anticipation to see Hannibal unclothed before him was strong enough to render him breathless.

The neckerchief was flung aside, cast off in the chair near the low-burning fire.

But the fire Will preferred was being fed with every loosened button, every glinting cuff link discarded, each slide of fine cloth and whisper of silk as his husband undressed before him. It was almost teasing, a slow and titillating disrobing done with quiet Alpha pride.

When he got down to his pants and shirt, Will reached out and stopped him, lowering his hands with firm, hot fingers.

“If this gift is for me,” he whispered, fingers trailing over Hannibal's chest to the flat buttons on his shirt, “then I should be doing the unwrapping...”

Hannibal's tongue touched his lower lip, his breath stuttering as his mate pressed against him. Will tugged his shirt loose, hands seeking beneath to find the naked skin of his back. Hannibal held Will's sultry blue stare, lids lowering to half-mast in pleasure. He held perfectly still, cupping Will's lean hips and shivering when Will slid his hand beneath the lip of his pants, sweeping the naked skin just above his buttocks.

“Don't stop on my account,” he breathed, mouth whispering against Will's parted lips. Will smiled and gave the heft of his backside a squeeze, the sudden sharpness of his nails unexpected but oddly arousing.

“It isn't that kind of tending,” Will whispered, echoing their conversation in the washroom with a shy grin. He pulled his hand free and reached for the buttons on Hannibal's shirt, warning him, “I'm relying on you to be patient when I can't be.”

Hannibal flashed his daunting Alpha fangs in a soft grin, watching Will's nimble fingers plucking at his buttons. His voice was a husky purr when he said, “As you are my husband, I will do as you say.”

Will shivered, concentrating on the tawny skin and silvered hair being revealed as the buttons were undone, the cloth parting over Hannibal's wide, deep chest and the sweep of his belly. Will peeked down as he worked, liquid desire giving an insistent lurch inside of him when he saw the ready bulk of his husband's sex stretching the fabric of his pants.

He shied away from it and slipped his hands into Hannibal's shirt instead, palms flat against the hot skin of his chest. Hair prickled to his touch, rough against his twining fingertips, giving way to the silky smooth, delicate skin of his nipples.

Hannibal reached up, flattening Will's hand over his heart. It thumped a steady rhythm, the vibration of it solid against Will's smoothing palms. He cupped Will's jaw with his other hand, thumb smoothing over the curve of his cheek.

“Do you feel that?” he asked, his chest rising and falling with his deep, even breaths, his heart pumping beneath Will's hand, pace quickening at even such a touch. Will nodded, mouth parting on a sigh when Hannibal said, “It's only for you. Always, Will, I swear it.”
Will's fingers curled and he closed his eyes, blindly searching out Hannibal's mouth and finding it in a gentle clash of lips. There was a world of pleasure to be found in their kisses, sharp teeth on soft skin, the tender suck on Will's tongue that he returned. Another pulse between Will's thighs awakened when he imagined the same insistent hunger being showered on the rest of him and the ways in which he might finally sate his own hunger in return.

It was Hannibal who drew back, breaking the kiss in breathless nibbles. Will's brow furrowed in a frown, his eyes glassy with desire and his cheeks flushed with heat.

The furrow deepened when Hannibal sank to one knee, then smoothed when his husband slowly parted his dressing gown and slid both hands beneath his nightshirt to cup one shapely calf.

“The only true way to show reverence as a supplicant is to kneel at the feet of the divine,” Hannibal whispered, stroking his skin in slow sweeps.

Will swallowed hard, his heart squeezing in painful affection for this golden-eyed lion at his feet. The brush of Hannibal's hands on his leg played up his nerves in a wash of goose-flesh, the hardness of his own body bulging beneath the thin layer of his nightshirt, obscene to his own eyes, but not to Hannibal's. He could feel his vast tenderness and desire through his bond to his mate, the eager need to touch him and hold him, to offer the tribute he had promised to pay.

Hannibal slid the nightshirt up to bare Will's knee, slow and studied, unveiling his smooth skin inch by inch. He caught the lip of the nightshirt on his thumb, dragging it up to Will's opposite hip where his hand clenched tight, a drape of cloth that cradled Will's aching sex and bared the taut length of his muscular leg.

Will took a shaky breath and bent his leg, settling his foot on Hannibal's hard thigh. There was a quiet challenge in his blue eyes, staring down with half-lidded sultriness that made his husband shiver.

Hannibal held Will's stare, tipped his head, and drew his tongue up the delectable knee before him.

Will bit back a gasp, the sensation of Hannibal's wet tongue tracing aimless designs up his leg bringing another throb to life within him. He could feel the thick wetness in his underclothes seeping through the fabric in evidence of his arousal. The hand clenched on Will's hip kneaded him, thumb dipping into the hollow of his hip to rub the crease of his groin in a gentle threat to his self-control.

And still Hannibal's mouth moved higher, a slow and lingering path paying homage to the curve of Will's thigh, to the rise and dip of his muscles, to the perfect symmetry of his form. The flavor of Will's skin grew sharper with his scent and Hannibal bit him, a low purr rumbling in his chest. He made his slow, loving way up the inside of Will's leg. The turn of his thigh into his groin beneath the stretch of his underclothes was the work of a master hand, the perfection of it so incredible that Hannibal drew back to stare for a moment, memorizing it, memorizing Will.

He stood breathing raggedly over Hannibal like a god of old, untamed and half feral and filled to the brim with passion, his foot planted firmly on the one he had conquered, the slight jut of his knee baring the core of his groin. Hannibal's barefoot, feverish angel with a scent that drove him mad with hunger. His brilliant, wondrous mate who looked at him and saw his flaws and still managed to want him anyway.

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, a benediction he would never stop seeking.

Hannibal rubbed his cheek against Will's belly, pressing open-mouth kisses to him through his nightshirt. Will's fingers wove into his hair, gentle and stroking.

“Let me see you, Will,” Hannibal murmured, tipping his head up, his hand sliding up the back of Will's thigh beneath the nightshirt to cup his round bottom. He could feel the wet heat of his swollen opening, the scent of it making him ache with yearning. He wanted nothing more than to bury his mouth against his husband's flesh and taste him, swallow the flavor of him down and please him, satiate the fire inside of him in a way no one else could ever manage.

“Please,” he said, his voice unsteady. “Let me see you.”

Will drew another shaky breath, his hesitance pushed aside for desire. He shrugged the dressing gown off in one smooth movement, the material puddling on the floor in a soft waft of scent. He stared down into his husband's handsome, upturned face and bunched his fingers in his nightshirt, slowly tugging it up over the straining bulge of his sex. It slithered up his belly, drawn tight with the arch of his back. It floated up to bare the petite curves of his wide chest with their flushed, straining tips.
Hannibal was breathless as Will slid the nightshirt over his head in a graceful tug and discarded it. The sight of Will's body almost entirely bared before him was nearly too much for him. His sex gave a painful throb and wet heat soaked him, the slippery essence of rut eager to ease the way for what his heart desired.

Will was golden in the firelight, broad shoulders and trim waist and gently rounded hips, his large nipples two ruddy spots of color on the pale expanse of his chest. His delicate underthings barely contained him, the smooth cloth sticky with wetness.

Hannibal's hand clutched on Will's hip. He shifted slowly, steadying Will's graceful body. His sultry amber eyes never broke the gaze that joined them as he brought his mouth to Will's flesh.

The first touch of Hannibal's mouth on his sex through the thin barrier of his clothing burst across Will's nerves and dragged a raspy gasp out of him. His long back arched, his hips pushing forward as Hannibal tongued the wetness already there, every touch a fresh jolt of sensation. It was overpowering, too new, too sharp. He rocked against Hannibal's mouth, breath hitching on a groan, eyes slitting closed with relish.

Hannibal lapped the salty flavor of him, his sharp teeth muted by the cloth as he tried to suckle him.

"Hannibal," Will moaned, one hand falling to clench in Hannibal's hair.

He wanted to tell him to wait, that it was too much, but he couldn't. This was Hannibal's tribute, this eager lavishing of ravenous attention on him.

"How you undo me, Will," Hannibal told him, mouthing every inch of him through his underthings until the cloth was soaked, clinging to his skin and transparent.

But it wasn't enough, not by far.

He ducked his head, laying sucking kisses over Will's taut sac, and curled his tongue behind to tease the soft, waiting wetness of his slit through the sodden cloth.

They both groaned and Will bowed over him, hands spreading down Hannibal's broad shoulders. The arousal that gripped him was so fierce that he feared his own responses should he feel his husband's touch without any barriers between them. He pushed against Hannibal's panting mouth, against his sharp teeth and the nimble pressure of his tongue. He moaned, long and low, shuddering so hard he feared he might not be able to stay upright.

Hannibal surged up from the floor and swept him off of his feet in one swift, certain movement. He carried Will to their bed and spread him there, a feast for a starving man.

The wind outside picked up, a sharp gust through the open window blowing out the unshielded lamp, leaving them at the mercy of the banked fire and silvery starlight, but it didn't matter to either one of them. Touch was all they needed to see by in the heat of their bed. Desire burned bright enough to chase away all shadows until there was nowhere to hide, exposing them in all their raw and honest hunger. There were no words to be said, no assurances or promises to be made that could properly convey what they both knew—this precious moment, a first for them both, was truly the start of their new life together. It might even be the start of a new life entirely.

Hannibal half pinned Will to the bed with his weight, his devouring kisses leaving his mate breathless beneath him. Will shoved his undone shirt down, baring the slope of Hannibal's broad shoulders. He dragged it down his back, muscle bunching and shifting beneath his touch. The rasp of Hannibal's chest hair against his tight nipples was exquisite, but couldn't compare to the thrill that filled him to have his husband pressed tightly to him. He rolled his shoulders back, teasing himself against Hannibal's flushed skin, rubbing the hard length of his body against his husband's hip. His fingers slid into Hannibal's hair and tightened, holding him still for more kisses, pliant and moaning as his tongue plunged deep and retreated.

It was heady, this passion; it was terrifying and exhilarating for Will to think the thing he had anticipated and dreaded and longed for over the years was easing towards him in rich Alpha scent and hungry touches, urgent but unhurried. Will knew his heat made him hasty, demanding an answer to the call his body was putting out, but Hannibal lingered over him, whispering into his delicate ear, "I will be patient, Will. I promise."

It brought a smile to Will's lips, a smile lost in his husband's heady desire, lost in a moan when Hannibal reached beneath him and gripped his nape tight in a hold that painted a hot, wet line down his spine to his groin.

Will's hips arched from instinct, canting backwards, the firm, impressive mound of his sex offered upwards, begging kisses. The sound he made when Hannibal reared back should have filled him with shame; instead, it filled him with pleasure when it was heeded, when it was answered with a growling Alpha snarl of impatience to satisfy him.
Hannibal moved to fling his shirt away, irritated that it parted him from Will for even a moment. He yanked his boots and stockings off, leaving it all in a heap next to the bed. Will’s hand found his naked back and stroked the ditch of his spine, waking a shudder of goose-flesh when he set his nails and lightly scratched. Hannibal was sticky to his knee from leaking, from aching so badly for his mate, and feared another such flood would follow Will’s teasing touch.

He turned for a kiss, reaching out to snag the ties that held back the massive bed’s curtains even as Will twined around him. He fumbled the other tie, distracted by the eager arch of his body, the heat of him a weighty tug Hannibal couldn’t resist.

They came together again as the curtains swirled down around them and blanketed them in velvety darkness, clinging and hungry for one another. Outside, the wind picked up, a gentle whisper through the forests of Marsham, the distant rumble of thunder lost in the pounding of their hearts.

Feeling Will was every bit a feast for Hannibal’s senses as seeing him. His supple, smooth, beautifully-formed mate curled around him, the strength in his limbs a delightful shock as he drew Hannibal against him, needing the surety of his weight, seeking the Alpha in him that was only too glad to answer.

He cupped Will close, moaning when Will’s swollen sex pushed against his own, pulsing and hot. They lay belly to belly, chest to chest, Hannibal’s weight a grounding force atop Will, anchoring him in flesh, in the here and now of his heat. No painful past, no uncertain future, only their present and the deep, plunging kisses of his bonded Alpha filling him up with delight.

Will’s rasping, excited breath was a goad to Hannibal’s desire, every tremble testament to how deeply his mate needed him, needed to feel loved, needed to be cherished and transported and cared for as he deserved. He gave with every touch of Hannibal’s hands and lips on his skin, clenching tight with pleasure.

“Beautiful,” Hannibal whispered, breathing it over and over as he kissed Will’s throat, tasted the smooth skin of his navel, found the ticklish, sensitive places beneath his arms and the delicate stretch of flesh behind his knees, every bit of him praised and explored.

“You are so precious to me,” Hannibal breathed, kissing his mouth, his ears, the curve of his jaw, the length of his throat, tracing a sharp trail down Will’s slender body to the fluttering stretch of his belly and back up again. “This is my treasure.”

Will bit his lip when the curve of his chest was kissed in a tickling tease of teeth.

“This is my treasure.”

He moaned, holding Hannibal’s mouth to him when he fastened his lips around one wide nipple and sucked, soft and gentle pressure with the stabbing lash of his tongue to tease him. Will groped to find his hand and urged it to cup him, panting, uttering another lusty moan when Hannibal ever so softly caught his tip in a light flick of his fingertip, expertly bringing it to hard attention.

Will shifted, rolling onto his back, legs wide. He nearly came undone when Hannibal pinched him and dropped his palm to his groin to cup him.

“Hannibal!” It was half a yelp, his hips arching. Hannibal’s approving purr rumbled through him as he abandoned one nipple for the other, paying the same thorough, sweet attention to it. He squeezed Will lightly through his underclothes and sought the ties, blindly undoing them. Will held his breath, shuddering as his underthings were slowly peeled away and tugged free.

Hannibal gave him one final suck and kissed his way lower, his intent apparent in the slow trail he traced down Will’s rib cage and belly. Will’s panting grew more erratic, excitement and nerves seizing him as firmly as his anticipation. His swollen length strained against his belly, soaked and sensitive and aching.

Hannibal drew back, the wet play of his tongue achingly close to Will’s ready sex before he sat up to kneel between Will’s spread legs, warm and solid, a darker shape in the resolving darkness.

“You are my treasure,” Hannibal said, kissing each knee in turn as he lifted them, spreading Will open to bare the weeping wet core of himself.

Hannibal gazed down at him, at the faint thrust of Will’s impressive sex on his lean belly, at the small thatch of hair wisping around its base, a shadow on the pale gleam of his skin.

“Every bit of you is the treasure I hoard, Will,” Hannibal purred, the thought of touching him almost undoing him, “and I am greedy for you.”
Will clapped a hand over his mouth to still the moan that threatened when Hannibal shifted, easing down between Will’s widespread legs. Hannibal’s hot breath poured over his aching sex and it bounced, eager and throbbing, twitching at the first gentle, light flick of Hannibal’s tongue where it was rooted in his sac. There was no stopping the cry that followed when Hannibal’s mouth covered him, wet heat and pressure closing fast over his skin in a brief, sweet suck. Will’s back arched in shocked pleasure, his body tightening painfully, his free hand clenching in the downy pillows beneath his head.

It was freeing to be in the darkness, to be felt and touched and explored without distraction. He closed his eyes and abandoned himself to sensation, relaxing into Hannibal’s touch as he was tasted from tip to base, light and teasing, a curious exploration of new territory that brought Will to writhing urgency. Hannibal’s strong, sensitive hands cupped his thighs and slid higher and Will gasped, achingly aroused as they barely brushed his sac.

Hannibal grazed kisses down Will’s length, lapping the dew of arousal from his skin, and lowered his tongue to the crease of Will’s groin. He panted, his questing fingers finding the soft, delicate skin where Will’s sac drew back to form sweet little lips, guiding his touch to the slick slit between. He traced it with his fingertip, so small and hot, echoing with the tremble that overcame Will’s body. He was so wet and ready the harshest pressure parted him, drawing the scant tips of Hannibal’s fingers into molten, wet heat.

Will arched against the bed as Hannibal’s fingers breached him, a gentle delve into his slippery body. His heart hammered with anticipation, a thousand fears and hopes rolling through him, excitement and disbelief that this moment had finally come. Even his vast imagination had never given him this, the questing, cautious touch easing inside him, the explosion of nerve endings that pulled a keening cry from him.

That cry went straight to Hannibal’s libido and broke the last restraint on his rut, a heat filling him that matched Will’s own. He pulled his fingers back and brought them to his lips, his groin clenching with desire as he touched them with the tip of his tongue.

Will’s flavor flooded his mouth, sweet-salt and meaty, tasting of heat and desire and a deep, frustrated appetite for touch that had long been neglected. Hannibal’s heavy sex pulsed, loosing another small gush in response, ready and perfectly eager to ease the way for knotting.

But not yet.

He could never pay tribute enough, he knew, but he would bring his mate as much pleasure as he could for as long as he could.

He found his way by touch, framing the jutting heat of Will’s sex with his spread fingers, thumbs brushing and rubbing his flesh. Drawing a breath to steady the force of his desire, Hannibal lowered his head and curled his tongue in slow, firm lap up the little pout of Will’s slit.

Will flushed from head to toe, toes curling into the mattress, body tightening with anticipation as Hannibal’s tongue teased deeper in a shocking press of hot muscle. He was so slick and ready there was no resistance, only the stroking tease of Hannibal’s tongue inside of him. Will clenched around it instinctively, his body gripping up with force, demanding a knot. His legs fell wider, allowing Hannibal deeper, groaning as Hannibal’s tongue curled within him, his head tilting to suck on Will’s slit in a soft, demanding kiss.

“Hannibal,” Will said, a breathless gasp that broke on a moan. His wiggling did nothing but urge Hannibal’s tongue deeper, filling him and feasting on him, a pleasure that built and built in layers of sensation.

Hannibal delved into him, purring against his flesh, lapping the tight skin of Will’s sac before plunging back inside of him over and again to learn the contours of his mate’s beautiful body. He couldn’t get enough of the rich slickness on his tongue, couldn’t get enough of Will’s low, throaty moans or the trembling arch of his body. His rut pressed on him, but it only drove him to bring his mate to the same frenzy building within him.

“I want to see you filled to bursting with pleasure, Will,” he groaned, dragging kisses up his sac, sliding his fingers into his mate’s incredibly tight body as he lavished kisses on his straining length. “I want to strip you bare to the depths and see the beautiful pulse of you.”

“Hannibal,” Will moaned, hips canting to push against his fingers, not thick enough, not deep enough, not enough to satisfy his needs.
“I want to please you, Will,” Hannibal purred, finding the head of his sex in a pool of arousal, salty musk he lapped with relish. “I want to make you scream with release, and when it’s over I want to do it again, and again, until we are branded on each other’s souls.”

Will’s teeth clenched on a reply, rational thought driven from his mind as Hannibal’s mouth fastened over his head and drew him down in a cautious, steady suck.

The sensation of being engulfed was too much. The tight, wet draw of Hannibal’s mouth slid over him, the dangerous brush of his sharp teeth and the gentle lash of his tongue as he drew Will deep drowned him bliss. A shudder racked him, his body squeezing down on the slow thrust of Hannibal’s fingers against the exquisite pull of Hannibal’s mouth on him. He knotted his fingers into Hannibal’s mussed hair and arched against him, sliding himself deep in his husband’s hot throat.

Hannibal groaned, the sound stifled by the girth of Will’s sex. He sucked, swallowing as best he could, aching with pleasure as Will came apart in his mouth.

No prior heat had prepared Will for the intensity of his orgasm, no teasing touch to this point any indication of how incredible it would feel. He thrashed, writhing, clenching around Hannibal’s fingers as it all pulled tight again, building on the first flush of release.

Hannibal fed on him, an Alpha drinking from the well of his Omega, throat and stomach and senses filled with the essence of his husband’s release. He swallowed him down and freed him in slow sucks until Will’s cries grew desperate, breathless, until the hand in his hair tugged hard enough to distract him.

He eased off of Will’s trembling length with a final sucking kiss and stretched over him, breathing hard and achingly aroused.

“Hannibal,” Will moaned, writhing against him, the weighty bulk of his husband’s body pressing against his leg as Hannibal settled against him. He cupped Hannibal’s face in the darkness and pulled him close, tasting the earthy salt of himself on his lips.

Hannibal kissed him slowly, cherished treasure that he was, his wet hand spreading on the curve of Will’s waist, his mate’s body a liquid flame against his. Will rocked against him, the pressure of his pelvis against the hard jut of his sex a delicious pain Hannibal savored.

Will groped down his body, his intent lost in the silky rub of Hannibal’s skin, in the softness of his belly that Will’s fingers gripped on impulse, feeling the hard muscle beneath.

He couldn’t resist reaching down, his fingertips skating over the stretched cloth at Hannibal’s groin, marveling again at how generous Nature had been with him. He grew dizzy thinking of being filled at last, that deep, gaping emptiness within him stuffed full of Hannibal’s swollen knot.

Hannibal groaned, a low, almost inaudible purr, his hips rolling forward in proud offering as Will’s touch drifted over his half-filled knot and lower, cupping the bulk of his sac with a sigh of delight.

“It’s all for you,” he whispered, bending his head to breathe it into the curve of Will’s ear, his eyes sweeping closed as that touch drifted up, fondling the pulse of his body through his clothes. “Just for you, Will.”

Will drew an unsteady breath when his hand found the wet stain on Hannibal’s fine pants, a more heady, primal version of his Alpha scent. His fingers squeezed in sudden need, that scent a key in the lock of his heat that turned on instinct.

Hannibal’s back arched to his touch, a broken moan escaping him as he pushed harder into Will’s hand. Another gush of wetness soaked through his pants and Will marveled at it, rubbing his thumb over where it welled, Hannibal’s rasping gasps sending a thrill of arousal through him.

“Will, there’s something you should know,” Hannibal whispered, panting. He tipped his head and rubbed his jaw over Will’s throat, marking his mate in a mingling of their scents. “I believe I’m in rut, or nearly.”

Will’s lids lifted, his blue eyes almost black in the darkness, sparkling and deep. His voice was a low whisper of throaty sound when he said, “We’ve thrown each other all off course, haven’t we?”

“In only the best possible ways,” Hannibal whispered and kissed him on the tip of his nose, rolling his hips to feed more of himself through Will’s milking hand. “Does it frighten you?”

Will barely shook his head in slight negative, barely enough to be seen in the darkness. He didn’t flinch or demur, he just gazed right back into Hannibal’s eyes and murmured, “It should, but it doesn’t. I trust you, Hannibal.”
It was so soft, so quiet but so profound. Another teacup offered, demanding a moment of absorption Hannibal's breathless hope supplied. He closed his eyes and bowed his head against Will's, shaken but gladly bearing up beneath the weight of the obligation he now had, the gift he'd been given, one he would protect at all costs.

“If you change your mind—”
Will shook his head again. “I won’t... Will you?”

“Never,” Hannibal promised, reaching down between them to undo the fastenings which held him in check. He shuddered hard when Will's nimble fingers joined his, as much a tease as they were a help, working the wet cloth of his pants and underthings off until he could fling them out of the heated little nest they'd made.

He wasn’t braced for the touch of Will's hand on him, the brush of his callused palm over his engorged sex. A deep groan escaped him and he rolled onto his back, belly bared and offering himself up for his mate's curiosity.

Will’s inquisitive fingers traced the veins that roped him, a slow touch that stilled with each twitch of Hannibal's flesh. The gods had been very generous with his husband and Will shivered to even think of what was to come. He circled Hannibal's wide head with his thumb, turning his wrist to slide his fingers down his length in a slow, measuring stroke.

“Gods, Will,” Hannibal said, a harsh explosion of sound breaking on a groan nearly lost in growing thunder. He dropped his head back onto the pillows, every muscle relaxing and yielding to his slender mate's gentle curiosisty. His sex strained up against Will's hand, shameless and proud and rewarded with a firm, squeezing stroke that nearly undid him.

Will lay against his side, warm and silken, one dangerous thigh tucked up over Hannibal's, one equally dangerous hand drifting over him, trailing down his slick skin to brush his knot. He tugged on it, testing the puffy fullness of it, awed at how much give there still was and how much bigger it would get.

“Will,” Hannibal said, a note of entreaty in his throaty voice. He wrapped one strong hand around Will's wrist and tugged it from his eager sex to lave his palm with biting kisses, whispering, “I don't trust myself to your touch, Will, and I am no young man anymore.”

Will nuzzled his jaw and whispered, “Then we shouldn't wait any longer.”

The rhythmic rock of his groin against Hannibal's hip teased them both and brought his husband to roll atop him again to still it, sinking Will into the mattress in a satisfying shift of weight.

“Do you truly want this, Will?” Hannibal asked, hard and throbbing against his belly, his weighty knot and sac sliding between Will’s marvelous thighs when he opened them.

“Yes,” Will whispered, sucking at his mouth, drowning him in kisses.

“If you're worried, there are steps I can take,” Hannibal breathed, his words muted by Will's mouth. “There would be no knotting, but there are other methods we might—”

He quieted when Will bit his tongue and sucked away the sting, his warm hands sweeping over Hannibal's shoulders and a deft roll of his hips dragging a low, desperate moan from his husband's mouth.

“No half measures,” Will said, returning the favor and biting Hannibal's earlobe, so deeply aroused even the idea of not being knotted was enough to send his heat into frantic refusal. “I want you, Hannibal. I want this, all of it. I've waited long enough for this moment.”

Hannibal dropped his face into the crook of Will's neck for a brief moment before he drew back with a shudder of anticipation, lodging the fat, swollen head of his sex beneath Will's taut sac. He swept his hands up Will's slender waist and held his breath, fighting the urge to push deep and rut him raw into the bed. His aching body released another pulse of wetness to ease the way, liquid heat flooding between Will's legs.

Will gasped, not expecting it, knowing only by instinct what it was. His thighs twitched wider, the barest brush of Hannibal's silken, swollen head pressing against him. One deft push would do it, he knew, and his heat urged him to lift his body and drive himself onto every inch.

Hannibal's hands stroked over him, cupping his chest, thumbing his nipples, shaping the curve of his waist with a possessiveness Will moaned to sense, the thrill of being so deeply desired almost as pleasurable as his husband's touch.

Hannibal's hands settled at his hips but he hesitated to give in to the urge that gripped them both, shaken by how powerful it was.

“Hannibal?” Will asked, a flutter of nerves waking to drive the heat of his need back a fraction. “Is something wrong?”
“No, I just...” His hands trembling as much as Will’s heart when he whispered, “I can hardly believe you allow me to touch you, Will.”

Relief came as a shiver, as a gentle tip of his hips that made Hannibal moan when his head slipped between the puffy lips of Will’s entrance.

“You are so wondrous to me,” Hannibal said, his voice unsteady and raw, his touch light and seeking, his skin tightening all over.

Will opened around Hannibal’s body, more than just his flesh, baring himself to his very soul, all the way to his heart, where one more wound would be his undoing.

The offer was met with only loving regard, his bottom cupped to steady him as Hannibal eased deeper. They both moaned when his tight slit was fully breached, bodies stilling to absorb the sensation of being so intimately entwined.

It was shocking and terrifying and blissful, the stretch of Hannibal inside of Will a burning pleasure of its own. He flung his arms wide, needing Hannibal to hold him, needing to feel the weight of his husband and float in his scent.

Needing to know that he was no longer alone and would never need to be alone again.

Hannibal’s hips twitched in response and he pressed closer, mouth parted in aroused disbelief as he eased into his mate. Will’s body was hot, tight and achingly slick, giving easily to the press of his thick body without effort. Hannibal uttered a harsh cry when he was encircled in squeezing heat, the muscular ring designed to milk Alpha knots tightening around his head, a slow ripple of Will’s inner muscles drawing him deeper.

“Oh gods!” he choked, eyes wide and disbelieving as he was pulled deeper and deeper with every rhythmic clench of Will’s slender body.

“Hannibal,” Will moaned, lifting himself to feel more of that thick heat sliding into him. He hitched on a sob and arched, feeding his hips against the intrusion to pull him deeper and deeper into places that had never before been touched. He felt full enough to split, full enough to fly apart into a thousand pieces but all he wanted was more and he said so, moaning it fretfully as Hannibal began to actively push more of himself into Will’s demanding body.

“Gods, Will, how can you be real?” Hannibal moaned, deep enough inside that he could lower himself atop Will and gather him up, nearly sobbing when his thickening knot pressed between their bodies. Chills spread down his spine as his sex fully settled into Will’s squeezing heat, a deep penetration he’d never felt before. The pressure on his knot was an aching delight almost as keen as the pressure on his head, pressed to a point inside Will’s body where another unexpected set of muscles tensed and gathered to milk it. He found himself furiously battling climax, nearly undone by a design specifically created to bring an Alpha maximum enjoyment in the shortest amount of time, especially one in the grip of his rut.

Rain began to hammer against the roof, the rapid pattering of it no match for the rhythm of their excited panting. The wind caught the bed curtain and tugged it open, the faint firelight bringing a shadowy glow to their little nest as they lay conjoined, bodies arching and entwined.

Will was beautiful and flushed beneath him, his plump lips parted on a sweet, keening cry and his eyes glassy with need. Just the sight of him so thoroughly vulnerable and undone brought Hannibal’s hips into a slow rhythm, nearly peaking from the combination of such beauty, such exquisite pleasure, and such tender affection swelling in his heart. He rolled his hips, moaning when Will matched his movements, those gorgeous thighs locking tight around his hips and his fat knot slapping with shivering force.

Will writhed beneath him, every deep thrust parting him just as he’d imagined but so much better, so much hotter than his heat, so much thicker than his hope had dared. Hannibal pushed deep, straining against him, the rub of his belly almost too much stimulation against Will’s spent sex. In short order Will was hard again, leaking between the press of their bellies as Hannibal kissed him with frantic urgency, whispering breathless praise. Will expected some part of himself to stand back, to withdraw, to stare with disgust at himself for being so shameless, so Omegan.

Instead, every bit of him rose in glorious delight, revered and treasured and filled with pleasure as his husband moved within him, his sex so fat and full it seemed Will would come apart with each deep thrust.

Hannibal coiled over him, a blanket of firm muscle and sharp teeth and tenderness. Will curled against him, bodies moving in smooth rhythm, perfectly matched. The intimacy of it left them both awed, their souls joined to one another as surely as their bodies.
“It’s beautiful,” Will gasped, panting harshly, returning Hannibal’s slow, lingering kisses, lifting to meet the deep, careful plunge of his thrusts. “It’s so beautiful.”

For the first time he felt what it meant to be Omegan at its very heart, the final puzzle of his nature coming whole. His body, designed by Nature to feel pleasure and give pleasure in return, gripped up tight to squeeze around the flesh filling him and Will threw his head back, his harsh cries muted by the bed curtains, by the thunder and rain raging around Marsham, no match for the raging release that overcame him. He moaned, low and sweet, thrashing and shuddering as Hannibal rocked into him, filling Will so full that each brush inside of him was a shock of sensation sharp enough to be nearly unbearable. The wet walls of his body clenched up hard with the force of his climax as it overcame him, fluttering muscle a squeezing glove to milk Hannibal’s sensitive flesh.

“Ah, gods, Will!” Hannibal moaned, haunches flexing in Will’s tight grip as he worked himself in his husband’s clenching body. His knot swelled, stark warning of his orgasm, already too large to fit inside of his petite, virginal mate. “I wish—”

Will shifted beneath him on instinct, panting. One long foot rose, toes curling over Hannibal’s hip. With a deliberate tilt of his hips, he pulled Hannibal’s knot inside him and anchored it where it belonged.

They surged together in a breathless moment of pure sensation as Will’s body adjusted, tightening like a noose around Hannibal’s swelling, aching knot and constricting almost too tightly, tying them together as they moaned as one.

Will slumped beneath him on a long, low cry, his long spine arching in sinuous rhythm, the demands of his heat finally met by the swelling flesh inside of him. It tested the tightness of his body, expanding to fill the emptiness he had never imagined could be filled. The distended pressure of it in the midst of his climax only drove the pleasure higher, another rupture clenching his body into a hard, taut bow of release.

Hannibal felt the world dim for a moment as he processed, no touch in his life preparing him for what his nerves were feeling. He arched his strong back and scooped Will up into his arms, slumping back onto his backside with his mate wriggling in his lap, every movement a symphony of exquisite pleasure.

“Will,” he breathed, kissing his parted lips, his small chin, the curve of his jaw and down his bared throat, his large hands clenching on Will’s taut backside, the full flesh filling his palms to overflowing. He could feel the way Will distended around his still-swelling knot and shuddered as his fingertips pressed in exploration, sent into a frenzy of rutting at just the thought of being so thoroughly locked into Will’s squeezing, hungry body. “Ah, gods! Will!”

Will clung to his shoulders, pressing his throat against Hannibal’s mouth in silent pleading for the bite that would mark him as claimed. His mind emptied of everything but his husband, his scent, and the pleasure they shared. His body acted without his direction, short pulses of his hips to work the knot inside him against all those places he needed it most. He could feel every thick, twitching inch of Hannibal’s pulsing sex inside of him, wedged so deeply his wide head pressed to Will’s cervix in a painfully pleasurable kiss.

His head fell back and his exposed throat lay bare, ready and waiting.

When he moaned a breathless little, “please”, the Alpha parted his lips and bit down hard on Will’s throat, squeezing him roughly as the bite triggered an orgasm for them both. His slender mate went wild against him, thrashing and keening, his hot sex spurting viscous wet up Hannibal’s belly. His whole body drew taut, squeezing in a rhythmic pull that pushed Hannibal’s deep, snarling climax to greater heights. He arched up and up against the pressure of Will’s body, teasing his throbbing knot as internal muscles milked his head relentlessly, drawing every bit of seed from him that he could give. His fingers clenched so hard on Will’s wriggling bottom that he found he’d penetrated him yet again without meaning to, his slick middle finger to the second knuckle in Will’s squeezing, tight backside. It only served to inflame him more and he groaned, breaking Will’s skin in a mark that would scar, snarling as he was ruthlessly drawn into orgasm in time with his mate. It was a cycle of sensation which left them both wrung out and sweating, muscles twitching and bodies hot.

Will went lax in Hannibal’s rocking embrace, eyes half-closed as he savored the shocks chasing through him. The sharp rupture of his first penetrative orgasm gave way to drawn out delight, as if somehow all that frightening pleasure had been pulled into a long line that was slowly being drawn from him, inch by excruciating inch. The fat knot inside of him pulsed and throbbed against places he hadn’t even known could feel so incredible. He could feel the thick flood of Hannibal’s seed flooding up inside him. It began to seep out, escaping the seal between them from sheer volume.
“Hannibal,” he murmured, lifting one hand to hold Hannibal’s mouth to his throat. The teeth in his flesh should have hurt but they didn’t, not when his whole body was buzzing with sustained bliss. He didn’t even mind the finger that had slid inside him where he was certain nothing of the sort belonged, but he was content with whatever Hannibal wanted to do with him.

Right now, Hannibal wanted to lift his head and kiss Will like he’d die if he didn’t, a bloody, frenzied mesh of mouths and tongues.

“Will,” he moaned, squeezing him close, desperate to feel every inch of him, “my beautiful, brilliant mate.”

Will returned his kisses with savoring bliss, floating in an afterglow nearly as pleasurable as the act itself. He ran his hands over Hannibal’s shoulders and down his back, tipping his head to give his husband unfettered access to his throat. Time slowed to an eternal moment of perfect completion as the fire died down to embers and the storm picked up force above them. They sat entwined, Will snuggled in the cup of Hannibal’s groin. In the quieter pleasure of lingering climax, Hannibal marked Will over and over as if striving to prove that they were now one, seeking confirmation of a bond that never manifested.

He kissed Will from forehead to sternum, from ears to fingertips, slow and lingering bites, soft sucks, murmured praise like prayers against Will’s skin. Will burned white-hot with his affection, his heart swelling with every touch and promise of devotion. The tenderness of being so deeply cared for brought tears to Will’s eyes and Hannibal kissed them away. It was only when they nuzzled one another that Will felt the wet trail of tears down his husband’s face and opened his eyes in surprise.

“How is it?” he asked, smoothing Hannibal’s cheek with his palm, tipping his mouth to catch a stray tear and sip it from his skin.

“You,” Hannibal whispered, emotion trembling in his voice. He closed his eyes, another tear trailing down his face. “All of the time we’ve lost... I gave you bitterness and you gave me patience. I gave you disregard and you gave me respect.”

His amber eyes fluttered open, haunted and earnest. There was a throb of Alpha resonance in his husky voice when Hannibal said, “I gave you pain and you give me this, Will. Beauty and wonder beyond my wildest dreams, and the potential for a future where we make one another whole.”

He kissed Will’s hand, tasting the salt of his tears, and breathed, “I see you, Will, and you’re so beautiful.”

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, twining his arms around his husband’s shoulders and squeezing his legs tight around his waist, hugging him with every inch. They were both a little broken, a little wiser, a little harder than they had been, but they’d come through it to find shelter in each other at last.

“Gods, it truly is beautiful,” Hannibal sighed, holding Will tight and tucking his face against Will’s throat, mirroring his mate without realizing it. “I am rich in treasure with you, Will. Should every fortune I have reverse, I could withstand the pain of it if only I have you near me.”

“Do you mean that?” Will asked, thinking of a future not so far from reach.

“Of course,” Hannibal whispered, stroking his back in gentle sweeps, absentmindedly tracing a scar here and there as his fingers brushed them.

Will drew back to look into his face, thoughtful and uncertain enough that Hannibal grew concerned.

“Even if...” Will said, trailing off to wet his lips, his thoughts refusing to organize themselves. “Even if there is a chance that I cannot give you an heir?”

Hannibal tipped Will closer for a kiss, the movement shifting his knot and making both of them catch their breath.

“You’re young and healthy, Will. You needn’t be nervous on that count. Unless there is a particular reason you’re concerned?” Hannibal asked, searching Will’s expression in the dark shadows of their bed.

“You must have noticed how faint my scent was,” Will said, eyes closing as Hannibal’s hands caressed his back, skin prickling at his touch. A deep, heavy warmth filled him to have the solid, affectionate approval of his Alpha rubbed into his skin, giving him the handling his heart begged for as much as his nature. “From shortly after you left until recently I’ve been using suppressants.”

Hannibal’s brows drew down in a frown, his hands falling to rest at Will’s hips. His confusion gave way to something that might’ve been hurt, or disappointment, or both. “Because you wished to live as a beta male?”

“After everything that happened,” Will said, his voice catching on a warble and his fingers tightening on Hannibal’s shoulders, “it seemed the best recourse. I know you aren’t familiar with Omegan medicines, but there is small chance that prolonged use could lead to—”
“Infertility,” Hannibal breathed, just gazing at him.

Will nodded, waiting for his husband to pull away, to put distance between them and consider the implications of what Will had done to them both, potentially.

He did not expect to be kissed.

He did not expect to have Hannibal’s arms rise around him in protective strength to cradle him. He did not expect his husband to whisper, “I have very faith we shall have a child between us, Will.”

Bewildered, Will searched his face, his bond humming with his husband’s sincerity.

“There is only a small chance, as you said. Very small, in fact. But even if it were a certainty, I would not separate myself from you for the world, Will,” Hannibal said, firm in his conviction. “You are more to me than a sum of parts to bear children.”

“But the Lecter line must have an h—”

“We will,” Hannibal said, hugging him tight and rocking him.

“The Dukedom is your legacy, Hannibal, and you must secure it,” Will insisted.

“The only thing I must secure is the comfort of my mate,” Hannibal said, tipping back enough to cup his jaw. His amber eyes sparkled with something so much deeper than affection, something Will even still was afraid to name. But named or not, it colored every word from Hannibal's lips when he breathed, “My title is not my treasure, Will, you are. Where you go, I go. Where you are is my home. The rest will sort itself out.”

Will blinked rapidly and ducked his head, unsure how to respond to such a passionate declaration, especially when paired with the weight of Hannibal's hands stroking him with such affection.

“There will be an heir, and I will rejoice,” Hannibal whispered, soothing the heated nape of Will's neck with gentle squeezes. “There is nothing that could be more perfect in every way than our child. You took such steps to forge your way in the world alone when I gave you no choices. I have no right to lament the result or resent you for it. All I can do is trust we might some day know that joy together.”

“You would stay,” Will said, leaning into him to poke his nose under Hannibal's jaw, quietly shocked to even think it.

“As long as you will let me,” Hannibal said, smoothing his back. “And who knows? If we cannot manage to produce an heir, it could stem as much from me as from the use of those tonics. There is no way to know such a thing.”

“I seriously doubt that you are a sterile Alpha,” Will said, smiling against Hannibal’s neck, too overwhelmed to give his words the deep thought they required. He kissed his neck instead, lingering, loving kisses driven by the singing of his heart.

“Oh?” Hannibal asked, willing to let the subject change, feeling how fragile his mate’s peace of mind was and respecting him too much to push the subject. “Why is that?”

“For starters, you smell divine,” Will said, not all of the heat in his cheeks from his forwardness. “For another, there's this.”

He tensed, squeezing down around the thick, softening girth of Hannibal’s body inside of him, forcing a trickle of seed to seep past the seal of his knot. The knot itself finally began to loosen and when Will felt it start to slide out, he tensed up, pulling it back up inside.

Hannibal uttered a shocked, gasping laugh when he did so, hips twitching to push harder into him, a dull pain deep inside of him Will found strangely enjoyable.

“I can say with utter honesty that you are the one who smells divine,” Hannibal whispered, kissing him with a laugh when he did it again, then moaning when his mate made a teasing game of it, letting his knot slide nearly free before squeezing it back up inside of his slick heat. Only when it had deflated enough that he could no longer do it did Hannibal find breath enough ask him, “Did I hurt you at all?”

“No more than I wanted you to,” Will told him, ducking his head to rest against Hannibal's throat, inhaling the Alpha scent of him, relaxed enough to allow it to soothe him in ways it never had before. He waited for the bond to press upon him, to make itself known, but twined as he was with his Alpha, it was content at last.

He couldn’t say the same for himself, however. With his heat momentarily satisfied, its demands gave way to other no less important needs and his stomach offered a muted rumble that made his husband grin.

“What are you smiling at?” Will asked, wincing when his bottom was hefted and Hannibal slid free of him, so weighty and thick Will felt empty for a moment, gaping and hollow for the fraction of a second it took Hannibal to settle him back in his lap in a warm bundle of long limbs.
“I’m pleased,” Hannibal admitted, tipping Will back to kiss the thoughtful furrow between his brows. “We worked up an appetite.”

Will flushed, a horrified laugh escaping him.

“We’ll need fortification,” Hannibal promised, snagging him by the waist when Will retreated, falling with him into a tangle on the ruined bed to tease his ticklish waist and coax true laughter from his mate’s plump lips. They fell still together, naked and cooling in the darkened room, tangled and blissful in the perfect harmony they’d found. Will closed his eyes when Hannibal nuzzled him, quiet but vibrating with happiness. He slid his hand around Hannibal’s arm and tugged, pulling his husband atop him, lips meeting in languorous contentment.

“I should clean that mark I gave you,” Hannibal whispered, stretching out over Will with the same indolent, luxurious ease of a cat, fingers idly rubbing Will’s flushed nipple and tracing the curve of his breast. The comfortable desire of that touch made Will shiver, his heat not as satisfied as he’d first thought.

“It can wait,” Will murmured, finding the smooth, delicate stretch of skin in the juncture of Hannibal’s thigh that curved into the thick hair at his groin. He could see him, finally, the dying fire granting light enough to make his eyes widen and his cheeks flame.

“I wouldn’t dream of neglecting you,” Hannibal said, breath catching, his rut bringing him back to attention with a speed he marveled at. Or maybe it was just Will.

Will shifted, twisting to flatten Hannibal beneath him, every curve and dip of his glorious body pressing him into the bed.

“Then don’t,” Will said, undulating against him in a slow ripple that got his full and heady attention.

“As you are my husband,” Hannibal panted, moaning when Will bit his throat with gusto. “I will do as you say.”

Emboldened by Hannibal’s eagerness, Will sought and found the sensitive places on his husband’s toned body, learning him with remarkable intuition that left Hannibal breathless with arousal in his callused hands, marveling at him.

“Not as old as all that,” Will breathed with a meaningful arch of his brow at Hannibal’s sizable appreciation. His fingers toyed with the hair on Hannibal’s groin, his cheek resting on his hip. The whisper of his breath brought a responsive bounce from Hannibal’s straining body, a dribble of fluid pooling onto the gentle dome of his belly.

“I credit your knees,” Hannibal whispered, biting his lip hard when he felt the light flick of Will’s tongue on his sensitive head, a tentative, quick taste of them both lapped from his skin, “and your thighs, and your incredible mouth, and your even more incredible imagination that tells you just where to touch me.”

It ended on a harsh moan and reflexive arch of his back when Will cupped his hand beneath Hannibal’s sac and rubbed the soft stretch of skin below, comparing their bodies, feeling where his own differed from his husband’s.

“You like everywhere I touch you,” Will said, two fingers pressing up on that silky skin, so different from the rougher, hairy skin of Hannibal’s thighs. He pressed his nose into the crease of Hannibal’s groin and drew a deep breath, a throb pulsing through him at his mate’s earthy, musky scent. He debated trailing his fingers lower and repaying Hannibal’s intrusion, but he shied away from it with a blush, uttering a startled, delighted cry when Hannibal hitched him up beneath his arms and rolled him onto his back.

“How are you so smooth everywhere else?” he asked, all innocence, moaning as his wrists were pinned above his head, the handling satisfying some deep need inside of him to feel Hannibal’s Alpha strength bend to the force of his heat. He squealed softly and wriggled at the tickle of Hannibal’s tongue teasing up beneath his arm, followed by the sharp press of his teeth.

“Graham men have never been hirsute,” Will said, toes curling as the kiss trailed to his chest and Hannibal’s tongue coiled around his nipple. “Ah! E-even my sisters were jealous.”

“How are you so smooth everywhere else?” Hannibal murmured, nosing into his other armpit and breathing in the heady scent of his mate’s body. He lapped the salt from his skin, his whisper tickling Will into laughter when he asked, “Were these curls so thick the rest just gave up entirely?”

“Should I not have stopped?” he asked, all innocence, moaning as his wrists were pinned above his head, the handling satisfying some deep need inside of him to feel Hannibal’s Alpha strength bend to the force of his heat. He squealed softly and wriggled at the tickle of Hannibal’s tongue teasing up beneath his arm, followed by the sharp press of his teeth.

“Ah! E-even my sisters were jealous.”

As well they should be,” Hannibal purred, latching on to suck, the buck of Will’s sex gratifying him to no end. He hitched his leg over Will’s hips, straddling him, hunkered over him to nibble his way up to his throat. “I hope they choke on it.”

Will laughed despite himself, eyes closing in bliss. He gasped when his other nipple was suckled, the pressure of lips and tongue driving him into a frenzy of need. He was soaking the bed with want, his body rhythmically leaking spent seed and arousal. He slipped one wrist free and groped down the press of their bodies to find Hannibal’s fat sex where it lay against his
lower belly, getting a lusty groan when he touched it. Eyes hazy with desire, Will’s hips rocked with want, his shaft hardening against Hannibal’s weighty sac while the man tongued and teased his nipple.

Hannibal wordlessly lifted up off of him just briefly enough to allow Will’s hard sex to slap up against his belly. When he settled again, Will cried out loudly at the pressure trapping him up tight beneath Hannibal’s heavy sac, loose knot, and thick sex. He rocked his hips helplessly, a delicious friction that only made his insides clench with need.

“Hannibal,” he moaned, frantic and desperate as the man suckled him harder, a painful pleasure that stole coherent thought. “Ah! Oh, gods, Hannibal, please!”

Undone by the aching plea, Hannibal released him entirely and shifted to kneel between his legs, panting as he stared down at Will’s flushed, beautiful body. Those blue eyes trapped Hannibal’s own, deep and sparkling and filled with anticipation. Such a difference now from before, when Will’s gaze held only the same wary expectation for pain as a whipped dog, liquid with sadness.

Hannibal would spend every day of the rest of his life to ensure that he would never find that sadness lurking anywhere in his mate’s expressive eyes.

“I need you,” Will breathed, his heat blooming up over him with force.

Hannibal wordlessly pulled Will up onto his knees and flipped him, urging him onto all fours. Will sagged like a wilted lily beneath him and Hannibal shored him up, bracing his hips to keep them from sinking.

“Gods, is there anything in the world more perfect than your delectable backside?” Hannibal breathed, grasping the bottom in question with both hands and bending to press his lips against the slit spread before him. His seed slid from Will’s tight body, mingled with the slick wet of his own arousal. It was honey on Hannibal’s tongue, hot and thick and spreading at the intrusion.

“Please,” Will breathed, arching beneath his touch, all shame burned away by the truth at long last. There would be embarrassment, he knew, days later when his heat had retreated to leave him facing his husband with no excuses, but for the moment all Will wanted was Hannibal.

The need in that soft entreaty dragged Hannibal up and over his mate, rut answering heat. He pressed into him in a liquid shudder, moaning, hands tight on Will’s taut hips.

Will groaned with delight to feel Hannibal settle deep, bumping hard against his cervix with the depth of his slow thrust. He thrashed at the intrusion and Hannibal had to pause for a dizzying moment, every inch of him undone by the clench and squeeze of Will around him. In a stuporous haze of pleasure, he tugged Will’s arm up and closed his frantic little fist around the headboard. Will shifted and did the same with his other arm, clinging like a barnacle to brace himself as Hannibal started to thrust.

He went slowly at first, gasping at each rippling squeeze of velvety, slick softness around him, his knot filling slowly with each push. He stroked Will’s wriggling hips, trying to control himself, soothing the urgent Omega beneath him with the touches he craved but never asked for.

Will’s back arched up, seeking his heat, and Hannibal dropped over him, covering Will’s hands with his own to hold the bulk of his weight. The cry Will uttered when Hannibal settled fully atop him drove a spike of pure Alpha delight through him and his knot swelled, seeking to give Will the tight, close press of Hannibal’s body that he required. Some deep, instinctive part of him knew that only this would ease him—encompassing Will in his scent, his warmth, his reassuring presence in order to make him more receptive and apt to conceive.

He rolled his hips, slight friction that made Will writhe beneath him, so slick that it dripped down Hannibal’s growing knot and tightening sac. He nosed into the sweat-wet curls at Will’s nape and lapped the soft skin there before he set his teeth hard.

Will jerked so hard the bed complained beneath his fingers, his eyes flying wide before closing in utter bliss. A long, liquid line of pleasure flowed down his spine from the piercing teeth in his nape and he was immediately pliant and yielding, offering himself up for rutting.

Hannibal groaned against his skin, feeling Will fall so suddenly docile and content beneath him. It only made the pleasure sharper, keener, directed like a blade towards giving instead of merely receiving. He wanted Will soaked in sweat and release
beneath him, wanted him writhing in sensation, his voice raw from his moans, filled up with his seed until he grew heavy and round with it, plump with children who would have his dark curls and Hannibal's amber eyes...

His knot slid inside Will's receptive body and Hannibal strained into him, lashing Will's skin with his tongue as the thought of him heavy with child brought his knot to flushed fullness. Will sobbed and tightened around it, his whole body gripping up around Hannibal's sex like the tightest squeeze from the softest glove he could imagine.

Will shuddered, his body swaying as Hannibal worked him, his mouth parted in pleasure that couldn't be contained. He was senseless with it, overcome, giving in to those instincts that ensured there would be life. He wanted it to go on forever, never wanted Hannibal to stop filling him up to the brim, never wanted to lose the blanket of comforting heat and muscle that draped over him, sheltering him from an unkind and unpleasant world.

Hannibal shifted and changed his grip on Will's nape, seeking another angle to set his sharp teeth, his throaty purr vibrating down Will's spine in shocking, delightful wave. One heavy, strong hand moved to stroke Will from wrist to sex, gliding over his slick skin with a butterfly light touch that made him clench again, crying out as the heavy knot and shaft inside of him pumped and thrummed within his oversensitive passage.

“Don't stop,” he begged, feeling the crest rising, shaking his head slightly to feel Hannibal's teeth in his nape, needing to feel this moment to its depths. “Please, Hannibal, don't stop.”

Hannibal shuddered atop him and wrapped his hand around Will's straining sex, palm sliding easily in welling slickness. He started to stroke him in time with the short, rapid pulse of his hips that worked his knot in Will's wet grip.

Will's eyes rolled up and he cried out again, thrashing after just a few strokes of Hannibal's hand, quickly undone by something still too new to guard against. He felt Hannibal's knot swell to aching proportions inside of him and sobbed with uncontrolled pleasure that brought Hannibal to the teetering edge of orgasm.

Will clenched around him, bucking in his hand, his seed splattering Hannibal's fingers until every stroke made a lewd sucking noise, spiraling his arousal higher. Will shivered delicately beneath him, rolling his hips up and back into the cup of Hannibal's groin.

“Hannibal,” Will moaned, sounding fragile and frightened, the grip of his body changing tempo and pressure in a way that the Alpha responded to instinctively. He pushed hard against the constriction on his knot and felt his tip press firmly against resistance.

Will uttered a throaty, keening cry beneath him and clenched hard in an orgasm in time with Hannibal, both of them rocking together as the flood started.

Hannibal's eyes squeezed closed and he carefully released his grip on Will's nape, panting and groaning as he hit the long, excruciating pull of his climax. His awareness focused down on the throbbing tip of his sex where that band of muscle milked him, ensuring that his seed jetted where it would have the best chance to take. He slowed the pull of his hand on Will's spent sex and folded around him, breathing hard as Will dropped to his belly beneath him, panting harshly.

Will had never felt anything so profoundly wonderful, not even the first time with Hannibal. Even so brief an exposure to his husband's Alpha influence was enough to make his body respond so intimately, eager to make up for six years of barren abstinence. He could feel the dull, pleasant pleasure of Hannibal's sex deep within him, aided by the way he lay with his knees holding him canted forward, every copious bit of Hannibal's seed flooding up inside of his womb. The sharpest peak of his orgasm subsided in favor of the slow, aching delight that followed and Will softly wept against his folded forearms, snuffling quietly in the hopes that Hannibal wouldn't notice he'd been brought to tears with the force of it.

Hannibal did, of course, draped as he was over Will's slender body, both of them boneless with release. He shifted just enough to lay warm, grazing kisses on Will's nape and shoulder, one hand sliding to smooth away Will's tears as he purred, “You will always be my reason, Will. Every moment with you is a wonder, each more profound and beautiful than the last.”

Will's vulnerability plucked at Hannibal, a fretful tug in his gut that caused him to whisper his mouth over Will's upturned cheek, kissing away the tears that kept welling in the corner of his eye, kissing the roundness of his cheek and down the dimpled corner of his mouth. A low purr more felt than heard rumbled from him, a sound deep in his chest that felt absolutely right, absolutely what was needed for the sweetly shivering Omega beneath him.

Will smiled, the vibration of Hannibal's purr running down his spine to spread pleasantly through his body. Hannibal's soft, warm kisses and darting tongue soothed him, lulling him to relax beneath the heavy press of his Alpha's body over him.
He sighed and closed his eyes, feeling Hannibal sink just a little deeper in a pain that Will cherished. Encased on all sides by strong muscle, warm skin, and that frightening Alpha power, Will yielded up his last little bit of reserve and basked in post-coital bliss.

The more relaxed he got, the less urgent Hannibal’s rumbling purr was but he didn’t stop, couldn’t stop, not while he was knotted into the giving and warm body of his cherished mate. He soothed and kissed Will, rubbed his slender shoulders with his jaw like a cat, marking him along his throat and shoulders with his strong scent. Will felt so tiny there beneath him, defenseless and fragile in ways that had nothing to do with physical strength or capabilities. The Omega resting so still beneath him, hips canted to accept his seed, was one he had done profound and irreversible damage to and every instinct he possessed urged him to gather Will up, to tuck him close, to guard him and keep him safe from all manner of harm.

Hannibal heeded his instincts. He scooped Will up and rolled onto his side, curling tight around his mate. Will folded into a neat little bundle of curled limbs and contentment in the curve of his body, sleepy and satiated for now.

Even when Hannibal’s knot loosened, his arms wouldn’t. He cradled his mate as Will slid into exhausted slumber so sound he barely stirred when Hannibal eased out of him. Careful not to disturb him, Hannibal shifted him to a dry section of the bed where Will settled, warm and limp, half on his back with one hand curled against his chest. The dying firelight touched the contours of his body with gold, catching the dip of his collarbone, the turn of his neck, the roundness of his cheek, so much beauty on the outside no match for the beauty within.

Hannibal smoothed Will’s curls, tracing his eyebrow and the fan of his lashes with tender affection. Will frowned in his sleep and made a soft, trilling noise that brought an answering chuff from him, reassurance he was there. He smiled when Will rolled, delving into him, poking his snub nose up beneath Hannibal’s jaw with a heavy, content sigh.

“My beautiful mate,” Hannibal murmured, tucking him close and stroking the length of his back.

He debated waking him, rousing him from his rest to tend to his neck, to coax some food into him, but Will looked so blissful he hadn’t the heart to do so. Instead, he dropped tender kisses on Will’s temple and the rim of his ear, a feeling of such completion overcoming him that he couldn’t restrain the tremble in his heart.

After all of the pain and heartache, all of the horror and unhappiness, after six years of resistance and pig-headed refusal, he found himself embraced by forgiveness, welcomed into his mate’s trust, graced by the honor of sharing his bed and holding him close. It was a gift far out of proportion to what he deserved, but so indicative of the loving, gentle heart beneath Will’s righteous wrath.

He would never forget this moment, nor the painful past that had nearly barred him from it. He would never forsake what his heart would eternally feel for his wondrous little mate, no matter what the future held or what Will eventually decided.

Wrapped in the warmth of Will’s arms, snuggled in safe against the whipping wind outside, Hannibal Lecter squeezed his husband close to whisper in his perfect ear what his heart had known far in advance of his head.

“I love you, Will Lecter-Graham. Always and forever, I love you.”

Chapter 36

The storm lessened in intensity, the rain becoming a gentle drone of sound on the roof, merging with Will’s even breathing. It was a symphony Hannibal relished, half-asleep and curled around Will, whose feverish heat ebbed as he slept. He took every advantage of such a rare treat, spending this quiet moment enjoying, cherishing, and soothing his mate.

Loving him, always and forever, just as he’d said.

He drifted in the surety of it, surprised the words hadn’t escaped him already. They seemed perched on the tip of his tongue, a bird of prey reading to burst from his lips with his heart grasped in its talons. It was not soft, nor gentle, but a force of nature that awed him and he hoped, prayed, silently begged every listening ear of capricious Fate his wondrous mate would return his confession to him when he was finally able to speak it.

A gentle rap on the door, furtive as if someone feared to disturb them, roused Hannibal from his half-asleep musings. Hoping it was their dinner tray, Hannibal eased out of the bed, smiling when Will’s fingers tightened on his wrist, a soft chirp trilling out of him.
“I’m not going far,” he murmured, kissing Will’s temple and the firm muscle of his arm as he slipped from his warm embrace. He kissed Will’s hand and tucked it beneath the blanket before he drew the curtains, shielding his mate from outside eyes.

He donned his dressing gown quickly, not wishing to scandalize his staff with his state of undress, and hurried to answer the door in case it was some issue with Abigail requiring his attention.

Berger was there when he opened the door, holding a lamp shuttered down to a narrow beam.

“Sorry to disturb you, m’Lord, but Mr. Tier has come,” Berger whispered.

“Randall?” Hannibal said, tightening the sash on his dressing down. "Is something wrong?"

“He didn’t say, m’Lord,” Berger told him. “He’s down in the parlor. Mr. Thatcher is in a dither from them dogs of his.

They’re soaked to the bone and dripping all over the floor."

“Don’t worry about Thatch,” Hannibal said, uneasy. “Have you checked on Abigail?"

Berger nodded and said, “She’s right as rain. She has some broth and another dose to help her sleep through the night, but she’s cool to the touch and comfortable. Price and I are fixing to move her to the room you had made up.”

Hannibal cocked a brow, easing out of the room into the hall on the off-chance their muted voices might wake Will.

“We thought it’d be for the best,” Berger said, bare mention of his Master’s current personal state. “Considering the washroom ain’t sound proofed. Wouldn’t want her to wake in the middle of things, would we?”

“Good man,” Hannibal said, clasping his shoulder. “Indeed, we wouldn’t. I’ll take care of my business with Mr. Tier and go check on her. Would you build up the fire and bring dinner up for us when you can?”

“I’ll keep an eye on Miss Hobbs, m’Lord, and give you a bit of a rest,” Berger said, beaming at him.

“Berger, you needn’t—"

“No, m’Lord, please,” Berger said, holding up a hand to still him. “You take care of his Lordship and let us handle the rest.

Cook’s just finishing the last touches on a special tray she insisted on making for him, so take your time and enjoy it. We figure you’d both have the appetite to do it justice."

Hannibal grinned, touched by how delighted Berger was for them and how eager he was to keep them in one another’s company. “Keep a watch until I return?”

“Price and I will see to it, so don’t worry on that count,” Berger said, moving to go within. "I’ll lock up the suite once Abigail is moved.”

“Thank you, Berger,” Hannibal said, genuinely relieved to have such capable people in his company. His valet, never one to be caught at a loss, pressed the lamp into his hand and slipped into the suite, leaving Hannibal alone on the landing.

He wished he’d had time to dress, or at least put slippers on to guard against the cold floors, but the arrival of Mr. Tier was so unquestionably out of character he hurried downstairs without pausing.

Mr. Thatcher was in the hallway, supervising one of the maids by lamplight as she cleaned up a trailing puddle of water and mud leading from the front door and down the hall. Hannibal picked up Randall’s Alpha scent, an odor of innards drawn hot from a body cavity and the wet sour smell of old leather. It wrinkled Hannibal’s nose and jerked his instincts to awareness, reminding him that his vulnerable mate was upstairs in the first throes of his heat.

“My Lord, my deepest apologies,” the old butler began, horrified the house should be seen in such a state. “Your guest has made himself comfortable in the parlor.”

“Thank you, Thatch,” Hannibal said, stepping carefully around it. “No doubt there will be another layer added on his way out.”

“Should I prepare a room?” Mr. Thatcher asked, adding with dignified disapproval, “In the stable, perhaps?”

“No, Thatch,” Hannibal said, his mouth quirking at the corners. “That won’t be necessary. Mr. Tier isn’t one for being penned in. He’ll be gone before you know it.”

“That is certainly a relief, my Lord,” Thatch said, dismissing the maid with a sniff before opening the parlor door for him.

Randall Tier was a tall, reed-slim figure who, predictably, stayed just beyond the reach of the candles. He stood near the windows with his two dogs at his side, the heavy chains from their collars looped to his belt. He stood near the windows with his two dogs at his side, the heavy chains from their collars looped to his belt. The sight of them never failed to impress Hannibal; the animals’ rawboned power seemed uncontrollable, a mere shrug of their shoulders more than enough to pull Tier right off of his feet, but never once had he seen them behave with anything other than strict discipline.
“Sorry about the mess,” Randall said, the chains clinking softly as he shifted. The dogs took two short steps forward, the faintest light finally highlighting the trio.

“I am sorry for the condition you found yourself in,” Hannibal said, dismissing it. “And own a fair amount of worry over why you would be here in the midst of a storm.”

“Mason has fled from the Capital,” Randall said, frowning. “Mr. Buddish has sent word to warn your girls.”

“I should hope he has,” Hannibal said, displeasure tightening his features when he noticed the way Randall tipped his head up, scenting the air. He cocked his head, stark warning on his face which Randall heeded, abandoning the scent of an Omega ripe in heat. “If he has fled, why aren’t you following him?”

“Why would you assume I’m not?” Randall asked, tipping his head in eerie mirror of his dogs. “Like all men, Mr. Verger is predictable in his chaos, Lord Clarges. I will have him in hand before long.”

The dogs tensed at his tone as if bracing to spring into action. Hannibal found himself comparing them to Winston, and once more admired their scrappy little stray’s bravery when he had neither the brute strength nor the threat of Randall Tier’s darling hunting dogs.

“Mr. Buddish made mention there is another more immediate problem here at Marsham Heath,” Randall said, holding his gaze with unblinking eyes, a dangerous blade of a boy with dangerous intentions Hannibal was fully aware he bought and paid for. “He suggested I offer my assistance to settle the issue quietly as your household is at a temporary disadvantage with the local Magistrate.”

“I appreciate his foresight,” Hannibal said, surprised all the same that Mr. Buddish had enlisted Randall’s help. “There is a man on the loose in the forest, as a matter of fact. He’s murdered several little girls already and wishes to harm one who is under my personal protection.”

Randall blinked, an air of question falling over him. “Should I put the matter to rest for you?”

It was tempting, certainly, and Hannibal considered it. He had absolute faith in Randall Tier’s tracking skill, even with a storm washing away the trail. In a matter of days he could run Hobbs down and either kill him, as Will said Hobbs would force his pursuers to do, or haul him before the Magistrate to face his crimes.

But that would only give Mason more time to find protection, more time to lay his plots and wreak havoc. Hannibal knew he himself was a match for Hobbs on a good day, let alone factoring in a mate in heat. Should he even manage to break through the measures they’d taken, Hobbs would never leave Marsham Heath alive, let alone cause harm to either Abigail or Will.

Hannibal would make sure of it.

“No, Mr. Tier, not unless the Magistrate appeals to us for assistance,” Hannibal decided. “As soon as my mate is able, we will be leaving Marsham Heath. Mason is the more troubling threat.”

“Mr. Verger is not as canny a prey as he imagines himself,” Randall said, a small smile tighten his face, “but the places he flees to are... interesting.”

“I forget how little knowledge you have of your homeland,” Hannibal said, opening the shutter on the lamp to dispel the shadows.

Randall flinched, face pulled in a spasm before falling back to eerie stillness when he said, “I haven’t any homeland, Lord Clarges, as you well know.”

Hannibal frowned, saying, “You said the same thing when I treated you, Randall. Whether you claim it or not, this country is where you were born and you fought to defend it.”

“Mostly,” Randall said. The small smile that played on his thin lips should have made him appear younger, but it only made him more unsettling even to Hannibal, who knew him better than most. “But I came to ask you a question I felt best not committed to paper. When I find Mr. Verger this time, Lord Clarges, what do you want done? Surely for all the worry he causes, you must wish me to do more than... watch him?”

Hannibal took a deep breath, feeling the weight of that question.

He thought of Will, upstairs and vulnerable. He thought of Alana, ready to deliver her baby any moment and only wishing to live her life happily with the woman she loved and their daughter. He thought of Margot and all she had suffered, the justice she’d been denied and the things she’d been forced to accept. They would never be safe as long as Mason trod the earth, slithering out from beneath the strictures of the law and blithely walking free when lesser monsters sat in prison.
“I want you to do something I should have had you do from the start,” Hannibal said, holding Tier’s flat, unblinking stare. “Hunt him down like the monster he is and scatter what’s left of him for the beasts to pick over. At least in that he can be of some use.”

Elation animated Randall’s face, excitement to be freed of his lead and loosed to take his hunt to its conclusion.

“I’ve been waiting for a long time for you to say that,” Randall admitted, his dogs shifting at his feet, made restless by his agitation.

“Before you end your hunt, Mr. Tier,” Hannibal said, unmoved to have just ordered a man’s death, “I want you to question Mason in regards to his whereabouts since he slipped your watch. Some very frightening actions have been taken against my mate and I am suspicious Verger or his father might be behind them. I want the names of all of his associates, everyone he’s had contact with. I want to know how he got back here and who aided him.”

Randall’s eyes sparkled with renewed interest. He cocked his head and said, “I will press Mr. Verger for answers. If they do not satisfy, is there, perhaps, another hunt to be had?”

Hannibal’s mouth bowed down into a grim frown, but he said, “There is a rather skilled hunter on that particular trail even now, Mr. Tier, but depending on what you uncover... perhaps. Perhaps.”

Randall’s lips split in a wide grin, baring his Alpha fangs in an expression of rare, true pleasure. “I will get your answers, Lord Clarges. Where should I send word?”

“To Mr. Buddish,” Hannibal said, “as there is no certainty where we will be at any given moment.”

Randall stirred towards the door, the dogs immediately at attention.

“If you should like to wait out the storm, Mr. Tier,” Hannibal said, eyeing the beasts yet again. “I can have a place prepared for you.”

“No, thank you, Lord Clarges,” Randall said, reaching down to pat the wet heads of his companions. “We are never bothered by Nature’s whims, are we, my darling girls?”

He straightened, meeting Hannibal’s gaze with the same placid calm that had greeted him when Randall had been brought to him mostly dead on the battlefield.

“I will take care of it, Lord Clarges,” he promised, inclining his head in a gesture he rarely used. “I am nothing if not your faithful servant.”

“I trust you will and know that you are,” Hannibal told him, and it seemed to content him, if such an unsettled soul as Randall Tier could ever claim contentment.

Hannibal escorted him to the door and watched him go, vanishing out into the storm as it strengthened again, the wind whipping his coat around him like the rapid flutter of a raven’s wings, another force of Nature unleashed to act on the world without mercy.

Will woke alone, curled up in the nest of mounded covers with the ripe scent of sex and Alpha permeating the air. He sat up in the darkness, the soft sounds of the fire being stoked and the quiet bustle of someone tending to the room reaching him through the closed curtains. It was a soothing reassurance and he sank into the pillows with a soft sigh, blinking in the darkness. There was a wet spot beneath the press of his backside, hot from the heat of his body and increasingly uncomfortable. He irritably wished whoever they were away so he could change the bedding. He shifted, restless, straining to hear when the door creaked again, the sound of voices in low conversation a quiet, unintelligible drone. As ridiculous as it was to be hiding in bed in one’s own room, Will couldn’t see a way to emerge gracefully with only soiled linens to clothe himself in.

And then there was Hannibal.

He could feel him just beyond the bed curtains, his presence a licking flame drawing closer as if lured. The tread of his feet was a vibration like thunder. Will’s toes curled in response, a reaction to his mate’s nearness as visceral as the fullness that swelled his heart.

A fine sweat broke out on his skin when he thought of his husband. The weight of the blankets rasped against his sensitive skin, a phantom reminder of Hannibal’s touch that made him wriggle, half in embarrassment, half in delight. His body reacted as if trained, nipples tightening and goosebumps rising on his arms. Instead of satisfying his heat, their coming together had
only provided fodder for his imagination to torment him, feeding the fire of his desire until his thighs clenched tight and his body stiffened beneath the sheets.

The intimacy they had shared, the fervent whispers of devotion Hannibal had spilled into his ear—it was enough to feed him for a lifetime, should he need it, but there was every chance he wouldn’t need it. He could have more nights like this for the rest of their lives.

Will lolled on the bed, smiling and drawing his memories to him, better than any jewels in his opinion. Hannibal’s affection for him was genuine, there was no doubt in his mind about that. If it was not love, it was close enough to kiss, something that Will never dreamed he would find, let alone in the man he was married to. He thrilled to Hannibal’s touch, enjoyed his often perverse and unusual humor, found his sharp intelligence provoking and a match for his own. The things he had feared as a child—Hannibal’s severity, his temper, his cruelty—had all vanished like fog on the river under the welcoming sun. No more flowers fed to currents, no more regrets, no more words left unsaid, no more isolation, just the certainty of his happiness and contentment.

An errant breeze from the window plucked at the bed curtains and opened a seam, letting in an eddy of fresh air. Hannibal’s thick scent spilled around him, teasing his desire like a cool, calm hand. His fingers clenched in the bedding and he shuddered, breathless. He was used to sexual frustration during his heats, used to the ache that would drive him to tears with needing satisfied, but this was a whole new cliff he was perched on, with a plunge promising an agony of pleasures yet to be explored because he needed Hannibal. He needed the soft purr of his voice and the curl of his lips when he smiled. He needed the teasing taunt of his voice and comfortable companionship that had grown up between them. He needed him because he—

‘When you love him you will lose every last piece of yourself to the bond he forced on you...’

Will stilled, his musings interrupted by the whisper of his father’s voice. He rolled onto his side and buried his face in the pillows, seeking the comforting reassurance of Hannibal’s scent. It poured in through his nose and mouth, thick and permeating everything Hannibal had touched. The phantom of his father’s voice faded along with his warning, eased by his confidence in Hannibal’s feelings for him, by the growing certainty that he had found his place to call home and that he could trust it. Finally, finally, a happiness that would not be torn from him.

The window sash complained as it was closed, cutting off the breeze. The curtain fell back to cloak Will in darkness, curiosity breaking through his deep thoughts when he heard water being poured and the dripping noises of a cloth being wrung out. He realized too late what his husband intended, about the time the curtains were plucked back, letting in the cool air and the firelight and exposing him there with his sweaty back bared to the room.

Will got control of himself, bracing to turn and face his husband, but before he could speak he was eased fully onto his belly and the sheets were slipped down to his hips in a lingering brush of fingertips.

“Jimmy will be back with a tray for us in a bit,” Hannibal said, murmuring it as if he feared to wake Will, but couldn’t resist speaking to him all the same. The bed shifted when he sat down, dipping Will’s lax body against Hannibal’s thigh. A moment later, the wet cloth pressed carefully to his skin and Hannibal began to clean the bite mark on Will’s throat, light motions so as not to pain him. “Abigail is resting comfortably. A room was prepared for her in the attic. Emily is spending the night to watch over her and Berger is watching her like a hawk.”

Will relaxed into the bedding, barely wincing when a light salve was rubbed over the mark on his neck. Hannibal’s fingertips were tender, lingering over the outline of his teeth. The touch tingled, tickling, and Will let the sensation slide over him, repressing the shiver that threatened.

“I should be ashamed of myself,” Hannibal breathed, tracing it with fascination. “Yet all I feel when I see this is immense satisfaction. Were you awake, you would no doubt fling that lamp at my head for saying such a thing.”

Will bit his lip against a smile at that, content to remain “asleep” as his husband rinsed and wrung the cloth out again before wiping the sweaty nape of his neck.

The cloth rubbed over his shoulders, soothing and cooling. Hannibal wiped him carefully from his nape to the dimple of his buttocks in slow strokes. His damp skin dried quickly, the florid heat pushed back by his husband’s thoughtful ministrations. He tightened beneath the trailing touch of Hannibal’s fingertips when he traced the curve of his spine, muscles twitching to his touch.
Hannibal followed his fingertips with his lips, kissing Will's nape, hands spreading over his back to knead him in an absent massage.

Will's whole body went liquid with relaxation, supple and giving beneath Hannibal's touch, the ache in his groin tempered with anticipation as Hannibal's hands spanned his lower back, fingers curving around his waist.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed, sighing it against his skin as he kissed him, learning the pattern of his scars with lips and tongue, thumbs firmly rubbing the base of Will's spine. He kissed each scar, whispering Will's name, and drew away with a final kiss to the top of Will's backside.

The sheets were peeled down to his thighs and Will stifled an indignant squeal when the cloth, freshly rinsed and squeezed, slid down into the cleft of his backside, cleaning him up with care.

It should have been horrifying, that cool, wet washcloth in such tender areas. Instead, Will felt a flush suffuse him, his heat responding with gusto as Hannibal carefully cleaned him.

“You can tell me to stop,” Hannibal purred, tossing the cloth over the foot of the bed and shifting, rolling Will onto his back where the sheets were dry.

They locked eyes in the firelight, Hannibal's amused smirk widening to a smile when he saw how flustered his mate was. He fetched a clean cloth and dipped it in the tepid water. He wrung it out slowly, giving Will plenty of time to say something.

He didn't say anything at all. Hazy-eyed but smiling, he reached out to touch Hannibal's leg, resting his hand on the bare knee exposed in the seam of his dressing down. Will stroked him there, smoothing his fingers over hot skin, finding the hair on his husband's body a delightful contrast to the fine, almost invisible hair that dusted his own thighs and forearms.

“How long have you been awake?” Hannibal asked, wiping Will's forehead as if he wasn't achingly aware of his mate's earthy arousal or the straining curve of his sex on his belly, rosy pink and at the head and pearly pale, just as he imagined.

“As long as you've known I was,” Will retorted, sighing as the cloth wiped down his cheeks and beneath his jaw, careful not to disturb the salve on his throat. “You moved Abigail?”

“Our very enterprising valets did so,” Hannibal said, smoothing the cloth over one alabaster shoulder. He lifted Will's arm by his wrist and cradled it, concentrating on his muscular bicep. “Our suites are proofed for sound, but the washroom had no need of such a consideration. They felt all sensibilities would be better spared were she moved.”

“How is she?” Will asked, a pleasant shiver coursing through him when the wet cloth swept down his ticklish side.

“She’s sleeping,” Hannibal told him, settling Will's hand back on his thigh, where it stayed even as he dipped and wrung out the cloth again. “I imagine we’ll be having a very unusual conversation rather soon.”

“You may have to have it without me,” Will said, breath catching when the cloth brushed over his nipple, Hannibal's thumb giving it a soft rub for good measure. It was too quick, a jolt of sensation in passing that made Will draw a sharp breath.

“No,” Hannibal said, leaning over him to press a kiss to his sternum, right over his thumping heart.

Will's heat-sensitive nose picked up the scent of a strange Alpha on his husband, a bare wisp of disturbance—wet dog, wet leather, and wet meat.

“Who was here?” he asked, wrinkling his nose against it, rejecting the scent in favor of Hannibal's.

“Mr. Tier,” Hannibal said, nuzzling Will's chest before straightening. He dipped the cloth again and smoothed it up Will's flank, tugging his thigh to bare the soft place where leg met groin. “He braved the storm to see if we needed assistance with Mr. Hobbs.”

“I thought he was tracking Mason,” Will said, finding it rather hard to concentrate when the cloth brushed the tight skin of his sac in a cool kiss of fine, wet linen.

“Mr. Buddish sent him along in case we had need of him,” Hannibal told him, turning the cloth to wipe the other side.

“Did you scent him on me?”
“I did, but it’s gone now,” Will said, drawing an unsteady breath when the cloth moved closer to his groin. His sex bucked with impatience, straining against his belly.

“Well?" he asked, wetting his dry lips. “Help with Mr. Hobbs, I mean.”

“It would be a relief to know he has been dealt with,” Hannibal murmured, returning the cloth to the basin for another rinse. “I felt we should err on the side of caution if we wish to leave with Abigail in our keeping. Magistrate Crawford is already frustrated and powerless; capturing or killing Hobbs without his presence or approval would only make him more so The fewer reminders he has of us, the better.”

He wrung the cloth out, the way his fingers worked as they squeezed it making Will wish he could trade places with it. It pulled a shudder from him, all else pushed aside for the urgency of his heat.

The cloth returned, gliding over his groin from his heated slit, up over the fullness of his sac, and over the thrumming length of his sex.

“The gods have truly blessed me with you, Will,” Hannibal purred, squeezing him. Will’s hips arched, flanks taut, a frown wrinkling his brow as he concentrated on his husband’s touch. “I never expected to find you so amply endowed.”

Hannibal’s hand was firm around him, squeezing him rhythmically, just enough friction to make him thrash. Wetness oozed from his tip, caught on the cloth as it was drawn from him.

“Does it bother you?” Will asked, breathless, a teasing smile on his lips.

“On the contrary, it’s inspiring an entire new world of possibilities I’d never considered before,” Hannibal told him, rubbing his thumb beneath Will’s head until his breath stuttered on a gasp.

Will laughed, a raspy sound Hannibal delighted in, but any thoughts he had on that subject were lost to a lusty moan, his sex twitching in Hannibal’s milking grip.

“Ah, Will, I want so badly to knot you right now,” Hannibal sighed, bending over him to kiss his tip as it peeked from the washcloth. He tongued his head, tracing the stretch of his frenulum as he tugged downwards.

Will moaned, winding his fingers into Hannibal’s hair, his thighs parting, just the mention of Hannibal’s knot enough to make him clench.

“Gods, the moment I returned I could taste you,” Hannibal said, curling his tongue around Will’s sex to give it a teasing suck. “I could feel you here, pressed into the mattress and ready, wet and soft inside and hard without.”

Will bit his lip, urging Hannibal’s mouth down on him, a low, keening groan pulled from him as his husband swallowed him down into constricting heat. Hannibal’s fingers pressed beneath his sac and Will cocked his knee up, baring himself for the fingers curling inside of him, a knot of knuckles that teased him to greater heights. He rocked against Hannibal’s hand, thrusting up into his mouth. It was incredible to have such a powerful Alpha purring and complacent, eyes closed in pleasure and perfectly content to have his Omega driving himself down his throat in unsteady thrusts.

It was even more incredible to have his husband so lovingly move against him, swallowing against the intrusion, intent on giving Will every pleasure he could imagine.

He wanted it to last, wanted to spend hours milking the enjoyment of it, plunging into Hannibal’s hot mouth to feel the lash of his tongue on his straining sex. But even the idea of it was too much, and Will clutched up, body jerking in pleasure as he spilled down Hannibal’s throat, the demanding clench of his body squeezing down around the fingers working inside of him.

“Gods, don’t stop!” Will sobbed, arching up to strain against him, stars bursting across his vision. “Hannibal!”

He didn’t. He suckled Will through a second orgasm, fighting the shudders that racked him and rocking his fingers deep until Will’s wet body gripped up around him, seeking a thickness his fingers simply couldn’t offer, seeking a knot that even his clenched fist could not rival, though he nearly brought himself just imagining Will’s taut young body tightening down around his whole hand.

He drew up off of Will’s softening sex with a throaty curse he sincerely hoped Will had not heard, panting and aching. Will’s fingers tightened in his hair and he tugged, urging Hannibal to cover him, trading his handhold for his dressing down and his sash, yanking his husband up to settle between his spread thighs.

“Will—”
“Hush,” Will said, fingers trembling as he fought the knot on Hannibal’s dressing down. He abandoned it, tugging the material open over his groin instead. The full jut of his flesh followed, a hefty weight against Will’s stomach. Hannibal moaned when he touched it, shuddering like a wounded beast above him.

“They’ll be here any moment with the dinner tray,” he said, whispering it in Will’s ear, the words accompanied by a bite to his earlobe.

“You started it,” Will reminded him, pushing his hips back to make room. His fingers danced over the silky length of him in a frenzied caress before he pushed Hannibal’s engorged head against his entrance, impatient and hurried.

Hannibal’s long back flexed and he buried himself in a sure thrust that left them both gasping, surging together on the bed in a pulse of joined flesh.

It was urgent and intense, Hannibal driving into him with such desperate ferocity the bed thumped a cadence against the wall, the old wooden frame creaking with the abuse. Their eyes locked, fastened on one another in helpless fascination as it built and built between them. Every deep plunge burst through Will’s ripe body in a rupture of pleasure, each catch of his tight sac on Hannibal’s growing knot a shock of almost-pain all the sweeter for how good it felt.

“Gods, you’re so tight,” Hannibal moaned, tongue darting out to lave Will’s parted lips. “Let me see you come apart for me, Will.”

He did, crying his pleasure in burning release, every muscle drawing tight in a spasm of sensation that broke on shudders, so great it refused to be contained. Hannibal moaned above him, amber eyes wide and excited.

“Knot me,” Will moaned, thrashing beneath him, an undulation of his lean body threatening to take what he asked for. He tipped his head up and bit Hannibal’s lower lip, whispering his own words back to him, “Let me see you come apart for me, Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s hips surged in a forceful thrust, burying his aching sex and knot deep in Will’s hot, slick body. The sound he made when Will locked around him was bestial, guttural, divorced of any semblance of propriety as the first flood of his seed rushed out of him in orgasm. His hips tightened, back drawing taut as he worked his swelling knot against the squeeze of Will’s body, the seal around him a painful pleasure that pushed them both to climax over and over until there was nothing left to give.

Will lay pinned beneath Hannibal’s boneless weight, both of them panting. His slender arms folded around Hannibal’s heated back, the dressing gown sticking to them both with their mingled sweat.

When Hannibal chuckled, Will turned his head a fraction, tightening his thighs around his husband’s lean hips and rubbing his back.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” Hannibal murmured, his panting slowing down but his voice still raw from exertion. “Only, perhaps I misspoke.”

Will shifted again, opening for a kiss when Hannibal lifted his head to look down at him.

“I said you would be the undoing of me,” Hannibal purred, throbbing like a second heartbeat inside of Will’s body, a pounding pulse he squeezed down around just to feel more acutely. Hannibal caught his breath, straining against him in a brief spasm, and said, “I should have said you would be the death of me.”

“Am I now accused of attempting to murder you?” Will asked, grinning when it earned him a kiss.

“At this rate?” Hannibal said, his grin rivaling Will’s own. “I won’t last the next few days.”

“Oh, you’ve kept up fairly well so far,” Will told him, adding with an impish gleam in his eyes, “for an old man.”

Hannibal’s amber eyes flashed. “Is that a challenge?”

“I think it just might be” Will offered, rolling his hips up to feel the firm kiss of Hannibal’s wide head deep inside of him.

“Then I accept,” Hannibal said, leaning down to tease Will with another deep, delightful kiss.

They ate eventually, late that evening with the storm wearing itself out overhead. Will simmered in his heat, fueled by Hannibal’s rut, feeding one another from the tray of cold meats and iced fruits Jimmy provided, supplementing with kisses which threatened to distract them. Hannibal drew a bath for him and changed the bedding while he soaked, taking every care with his comfort before having a bath of his own.
Will drank half a jug of cold water in his absence, his craving for salt satisfied by the cured meats he was firmly assured were procured from the Capital and not from the Hobbs family.

Hannibal emerged in short order, damp and shivering in the lingering chill. Will curled up on the bed and watched him, deep contentment filling him as Hannibal bent to bank the fire for the night. His features were hawkish in the golden light, stark in absent repose. Will's heart swelled with affection for him, knowing his husband was nothing like his looks would have him seem. The force of his tenderness left him breathless with how much this man had come to mean to him in such a short time, awed they had ever found one another so perfectly suitable after the horrors of their beginning.

Hannibal turned and caught him looking and Will grinned when his husband asked, “Now who is smiling?”

“I am,” Will said, hugging a pillow to his chest and stretching long on the bed, the smooth texture of the covers prickling his skin. His smile deepened when Hannibal abandoned the fire to crouch next to the bed and kiss his hand, nuzzling him for the touch of his fingers.

“You look so intimidating,” Will whispered, smoothing his hand over Hannibal’s high cheekbone with reverence. “When I first met you, you seemed more like a statue to me. A perfect, beautiful sculpture of marble, smooth, cold stone with the same reserve and grim intent of a god.”

Hannibal grinned, baring his sharp Alpha fangs in the firelight.

“What do I seem like, now?” he murmured, kissing the pulse point at Will’s wrist just to feel the thrum of his heart pick up its pace.

“Warm,” Will said, spreading his fingers over Hannibal’s cheek to trace the jut of his severe cheekbone. “Understanding, accepting, insatiable.”

“Shall I make a quip about pots and kettles?” Hannibal asked, grinning, and Will laughed, subsiding. His smile turned thoughtful enough Hannibal asked, “Is something troubling you?”

“No, it’s just... this isn’t like what I feared it would be,” Will finally said, shifting to make room as Hannibal stood. He shivered, the cold air and Hannibal slipping out of his dressing gown conspiring to distract him. “I thought I would lose myself somehow if I ever let an Alpha touch me. That I would get swallowed up in my own nature and become some wretched bitch in heat.”

Hannibal paused, one knee on the bed and his bare body limned in light.

“I was always told I would be overcome with frenzy,” Will said, filling the sudden silence with words. He turned away, the bed sinking as Hannibal slid in next to him, “that my heat would reduce me to some pitiable creature begging for a knot, any knot, and I would be mindless in my desires.”

“Who on earth told you that?” Hannibal asked, drawing Will into the shelter of his arms, bare skin on bare skin, coiling around him to keep him safe.

“My sisters,” Will said, pushing his nose beneath Hannibal’s jaw to comfort himself with his scent. Hannibal wrapped his arms around him and pulled him in tight, soothing him. “My father. He said heat was the ruin of many an Omega reduced to prostitution with the drive of their needs. He cautioned me strongly never to allow myself near an Alpha during such a time in case I should become nothing more than a void of demands from that point on.”

“Gods,” Hannibal breathed, bringing Will’s hand to his lips for a kiss. “Your family is a menace! What did your mother tell you?”

“I was never given any other instruction,” Will said, “and with the way my heats were, the way I felt in those times, I was certain they were right. It seemed I was nothing more than an empty space waiting to be filled, mindless and desperate for breeding.”

The tone of his voice brought Hannibal’s amber eyes to search his face. Curious, he asked, “How long have you been having heats, Will? You were very young when you first came to Hartford, I imagined it would take years.”

“No,” Will said, his smile more a grimace in his sudden discomfort. “No, when they told me you’d gone... Well, let’s just say my nature overreacted.”

Hannibal frowned, his arms tightening on his mate in a spasm of distress.

“Will, are you telling me that my leaving provoked your first heat?”

“Yes,” Will said, simple and direct. There was no reproach in his voice, but there didn’t need to be.
Hannibal had enough reproach for the both of them.

“I was terrified I’d done everything wrong,” Will admitted, tracing patterns in the hair on Hannibal’s chest, anything to avoid making eye contact. “I was sure the direct Lecter line would end because of me, that I would be annulled and sent home in disgrace to be punished by my father. I suppose my body decided a last-ditch effort was in order and attempted to draw you to me with such an awful state.”

“Aawful state? Will, you were having a heat!” Hannibal said, rising to the defense of the youth he’d been. “Your first heat! Which I understand is often the worst.”

He mentally berated himself for not being there when Will needed him, his self-recrimination redoubling when he realized just how many of Will’s seasons he’d missed.

“I should have been there,” he said, squeezing Will to his chest. “Gods, Will, all this time I should have been there, but for your first—”

“I don’t think that would have gone well for either of us, considering your reaction to my initial offer,” Will said, his hand sliding between them to find and rub the softness of Hannibal’s belly. His husband was lithe and sleek, a toned beast from head to elegant toe, but the beauty of him was elevated to perfection by the softness of his belly. Will couldn’t resist cupping its slight roundness, distracting himself from his painful thoughts. “I hid in my dressing room, I was so mortified. Jimmy would bring me trays every few hours to be sure I had enough to eat and drink.”

“Please tell me you haven’t been spending your heats in your dressing room,” Hannibal said, aghast at even the idea of it. He rubbed his chin over Will, a distressed, unconscious marking he couldn’t control.

“No, of course not,” Will said, spreading his fingers over Hannibal’s stomach. “I have a room in the attic. It’s quiet there and I don’t bother anyone.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, a faint note of reproach in his voice. “Gods, six years...”

He trailed off, quietly horrified to think of his mate suffering through this alone all these years. He shifted, drawing Will’s hand from his stomach to lace their fingers together, earnest when he said, “You understand it’s no encumbrance, Will? When you speak of your heat, of the very natural rhythm of your body nothing and no one can help or change, it pains me to hear you do so with such loathing.”

Will’s fingers tightened in his reflexively, a bare betrayal of his thoughts.

“I hear the echo of the man I was in your words,” Hannibal said, tugging on him to get his attention. “I hear your father’s lessons and I want to erase them from your heart. What you said to me when I was so deep inside of you is the truth.”

Will trembled, flustered when Hannibal whispered, “It is beautiful, Will.”

Hannibal bent his head and kissed him, wrapping Will in the comfort of his scent, noting the dots of sweat welling up on his temples. “Perhaps I am selfish to say so, but I hope you will spend every moment of every heat to come allowing me to make up for it, to care for you as an Alpha and as your mate.”

Will smiled, his lower lip curling inwards in a way that Hannibal had found to be his favorite, a sure indication he had surprised his mate. Will snuggled against him, his palm settling on Hannibal’s stomach once more as if he couldn’t resist it.

“That is selfish,” he whispered, giving Hannibal a squeeze, “but an Alpha is expected to be selfish at times.”

“Then I am gladly myself,” Hannibal said, his husband warming in his arms, the urge to come together rising between them, all the stronger for being shared. He wet his lips and added in a breathless whisper, “As I hope you are gladly yourself, in turn.”

Will slipped over him, lithe and weighty and warm, and whispered with a kiss, “I’m starting to be.”

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For the next week the Lords Clarges heeded nothing in the world but one another. Nature held them fast in the palm of Her hand, floating in a sensual haze which left no room beyond the next kiss, the next touch, the next breathless confession. Idle conversations became serious ones, curious questions led to seeking touches. They poured over one another until every mole, every hair, every tender inch was memorized and savored. Will had never felt so profoundly cherished in his life and Hannibal had never felt so complete.
Yet the bond Hannibal instinctively searched for, reached for, longed for was nowhere to be found. It distressed him more than he thought it might. It worried him that his own failings as an Alpha, his own refusal to heed his instincts, had somehow cheated them of what should have come naturally. Time and again, he strained to make a connection without managing to do so. Having failed Will in so many ways to this point, it disturbed Hannibal to think he would fail him in this, too, that some lack on his part would prevent them from having what was largely claimed to be the most satisfying aspect of an Alpha-Omega joining.

But bond or no bond, he had Will. Not forever, perhaps not even past the demands of his voracious heat, but for now he had him and after everything that had happened he could never ask for more than to love his husband as much or as little as Will would allow.

Will woke up in reluctant degrees, warm and content and sore. He yawned softly and snuggled closer to the warm, large body curled around his, legs tangled together beneath the bedclothes. Hannibal’s furry chest and belly pressed snug to his back and bottom, both of them nude as grapes.

The heat haze was gone, leaving in its place the mixed moments he’d spent being thoroughly and expertly bred to his eyeballs in Hannibal’s huge four-poster bed. He couldn’t recall many details past the first night quite as yet. It all melded into a dreamlike euphoria of shared orgasm and insatiable hunger for one another his heat and Hannibal’s rut had only amplified rather than created.

Will cautiously placed a hand over his belly, swollen from hard use. He usually did swell some, his womb demanding tribute and his hormones stimulating him to be receptive. That wasn’t quite the only reason this time, he knew, and dreaded standing up. All of Hannibal’s copious leavings had to go somewhere and straight down both legs was the reasonable assumption. The bed was soaked beneath them, the scent of spent sex so strong Will’s mouth watered, a tingle of arousal running over him.

Hannibal nuzzled his nape, exhaling deeply against Will’s curls, one heavy arm folded over his chest and pinning him into place. Will shivered, goosebumps rising over his skin, a responsive lurch inside of him bringing more soreness to the surface. He felt raw and sensitive, puffy to such an extreme even his sac was swollen from the friction of relentless use. Hannibal’s scent permeated him, covering his own with Alpha male, sweat, and seed.

‘I want you so full of me that you’re heavy with it...’

Will smiled at the memory of those words, spoken in a heated moan against his ear. The moment returned clearly—the powerful pistoning of his husband’s corded hips driving the hard curve of his sex deep, the hands that had pinned him in his writhing need, the gratifying climax that had claimed them both, leading to Hannibal’s fervent wish and the reverent touch to his belly.

Hannibal clutched Will tighter in response to his shiver, covering him with heat and heavy scent, preventing him from moving. It was comforting, comfortable, a teasing promise of what could be if Will accepted Hannibal into his life, into his bed, and into his heart.

The future was no longer a bleak horror before him, but one filled with potential Hannibal would strive to make true. They could be happy together, content in one another as their affection blossomed to something more, share the joy of raising the children Hannibal insisted would be born. Grandfather would be overjoyed, and even if things weren’t always perfect at least they would be able to find their way ahead together, invested in one another as equals.

‘And what will you tell him about your bond?’

Will’s happy smile faltered, the thought a product of habit, of a lifetime spent questioning even the smallest thing that went right. He touched the bite on his neck, anxiety threading its way into his glowing joy. He shivered, recalling how Hannibal had marked him, those heavy Alpha fangs putting a claiming bite on him Will had never imagined he would carry.

The bond should have followed. This was how they should have formed it, twined as one and clinging together, body locked to body in pleasure. It should have been the ultimate culmination of what they’d shared.

But it hadn’t happened.

It hadn’t been enough to negate the bond Will had formed, and he feared it never would be. Francis’ anguished voice returned to him with a sense-memory of his wood smoke scent, whispering, ‘It cannot be undone...’
Will drew a shaky breath, worry pressing down the swell of happiness within him. He had so hoped through some magic of serendipity that what they were feeling for one another, the strength of the connection they shared, would allow a bond to form from Hannibal’s end, uniting them at last.

Hannibal’s heartbeat echoed through his chest, strong and steady, a sound and feeling Will had come to rely on. It had lulled him to sleep and pounded a rhythm of excitement over the past days of his heat, a sure measure of Hannibal’s state of mind. Throughout it all, Hannibal had been eager and delighted by everything that had happened, endlessly praising Will from his eyebrows to the dangerous sharpness of his mind.

Yet, all this time Hannibal had never questioned why a bond had not formed. He never even seemed to notice or expect such a thing. Perhaps a man who was willing to overlook a barren mate was also willing to overlook the lack of a reciprocal bond? Perhaps, as he claimed, having Will was enough, and he would never ask, never wonder, never dream Will’s twisted bond existed?

Will rolled in his loose embrace, cupping Hannibal’s stubble-shadowed jaw, breathing in time with him. He brushed an errant lock of hair from his golden brow, fingertips falling to trace the fine, nearly invisible arch of one eyebrow. The scar from Will’s crop crossed his cheek, a pink seam across his stark cheekbone. Will traced it and an aching tenderness overcame him, so strong he blinked back sudden tears. He swallowed hard against it, knowing it was no simple infatuation that swelled and fluttered in his chest, beating wings like a butterfly’s in the cage of his soul.

The distant roar of waves throwing themselves against the cliff grew louder in his imagination. He knew how precarious his position was. He was poised with one foot over the abyss, arms open as if he might fly instead of fall, and all that awaited him was a drop that could, for all its elation, end in the same painful way.

“Will,” Hannibal murmured, disturbed by the strength of his emotions, a frown bowing his mouth. His hand smoothed over Will’s side, the same long fingers that had traced Will’s scars, the same hand that had brought him so much pleasure. The same hand that had seized him almost seven years ago and shaken him into an attachment Hannibal had no idea existed.

Will would have to confess to it, would have to tell Hannibal the unhappy truth in all its implications. It didn’t frighten him to think of doing so, it frightened him because he knew how his husband would react. He would smooth Will’s curls, press Will’s hands to his cheeks, and claim it didn’t matter. Greedy, Hannibal said of himself, insisting he could never get his fill, but who was being greedy in the end if Hannibal decided he could and would give up his chance for a child and a bond for Will’s sake?

It might work at first, for ten or fifteen years until the bloom went off the rose and the novelty wore thin and Hannibal caught the scent of an Omega who—

“Stop,” Will breathed, admonishing himself and appalled with his own thoughts, knowing very well Hannibal would resist any temptation. He was a man of his word, a man of integrity and fidelity who kept the promises he made, no matter what, because he cared about Will and wanted to make things right.

Guilt.

And how much guilt would settle on Will’s heart years down the line when he looked at this man—beautiful, wonderful, changed beyond recognition into someone Will took immeasurable delight in—and knew himself to be a burden at long last? What kind of person would make such demands of someone they cared for so deeply?

Will drew a cautious breath, his throat tight with an ache he couldn’t force down. He needed a moment to himself, away from the influence of Hannibal’s presence and his soothing scent. He needed to think, clearly and rationally, and he could not do that when every inch of him wanted nothing more than to delve into Hannibal’s arms and resign the rest to the whims of Fate. The very strength of his affections made him question his own motives—did he want Hannibal to stay and consign him to a half-lived life because he cared for him? Or did he care enough for Hannibal to want better for him than he would get?

What had been done to Will wasn’t fair, but neither was holding an Alpha in a potentially childless marriage without even the comfort of a bond. He couldn’t make his decision on the basis of his own happiness, not anymore, and he wouldn’t make it alone. He had to consider it carefully, weigh the loss against the potential gains, and do what was in everyone’s best interests. He would tell Hannibal about the bond, take his responses into consideration, and then put an end to this lingering anticipation by making his decision at long last.
Feeling more in control with such a plan, Will waited until Hannibal slid back into deeper sleep and managed to wriggle free of him, swinging his feet out from beneath the bedclothes to plant his bare feet on the cold floor.

A warm hand brushed down his spine and Will gasped, shivering, his cheeks flaming with bright color.

“Will?” Hannibal murmured, awakening to find him perched on the edge of the bed about to flee as fast as he could safely hobble away. The bed shifted and Will tipped backwards with a soft yelp, tumbling into the heat of Hannibal’s body as he sat up. Hannibal chuckled softly at him, holding him fast, and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Will said, his blush betraying him, florid and heated.

Hannibal searched his face, noting the absence of a glassy sheen to his eyes, the coolness of his skin, his rising agitation, all hallmarks that Will’s heat had ended.

Amused to see such a surly expression on his mate’s beautiful face, Hannibal easily scooped him up into his arms and packed him off to the washroom, ignoring Will’s indignant squeak.

“What are you doing?!” Will demanded, mortified when Hannibal plopped him down on the toilet, both of them still stark naked and tacky with sweat, seed, and saliva. Hannibal turned away from him to pump a few splashes of water into the tub, testing to make sure it was warm, the slope of his shoulders and the bare length of his strong back a stark reminder to Will of just how powerful his body truly was.

The silence that stretched was blessedly broken by the slap of water into the tub, muting the embarrassing result of Hannibal’s Alpha excess.

Hannibal filled the tub halfway before he straightened and turned, the outgrowth of stubble softening the severe lines of his mouth and jaw. Will felt that stubble prickle him in his memory, catching on the suck-swollen, tender skin of one nipple, the rasp of it soothed away by Hannibal’s laving tongue...

Will averted his gaze so rapidly he swayed on the toilet. Seeing Hannibal’s body by firelight was much different than seeing him in strong sunlight, and he was every bit as beautiful to Will now as he’d been in the height of his heat, from the amused curve of his mouth down the furry expanse of his chest to the slight rise of his belly where his hair grew darker and thicker, framing his heavy sex between his solid thighs.

Will bent over and hid his face against his knees, fingers laced over the back of his head, his pearly skin turning ever-deepening shades of pink.

Charmed by Will’s response, Hannibal chuckled softly and said, “Will, it isn’t as if you haven’t seen me naked.”

“Not like this,” Will said, proud of how steady his voice was, even if it was muffled by his knees. “Could you please excuse me?”

“Of course,” Hannibal told him, and went to the door. “I’ll ring for Jimmy and join you in the bath.”

“No, Hannibal!” Will called, lifting his head, the thread of distress in his voice bringing a concerned frown to his husband’s face. “I just...”

Hannibal’s heart sank when he saw the strained look on Will’s face and the wild anxiety in his expressive blue eyes.

“Is something the matter, Will?” Hannibal asked, worried by his unease.

“No, I just need a moment,” Will said, the pink of his skin consolidating into his cheeks, a stark contrast to the dark circles beneath his eyes. He’d dropped weight in the last few days through sweating and exertion and looked too sharp to Hannibal, drawn and tired. “I’m not...”

Hannibal smiled, trying not to let his disappointment translate in his body language to trouble his flustered mate.

“I apologize, Will, I didn’t mean to overstep,” he said, marking the vast relief on his husband’s face. “Of course, you must want some privacy after so long; it was thoughtless of me not to realize.”

“Hannibal,” Will said again, pausing him as he opened the suite door. When Hannibal’s amber eyes met his, they were glittering and hopeful but wary, as if it was too much to hope their time together could continue as it had. “I just... I need some time to wrap my mind around the last few days, that’s all. I just need to catch my breath.”

Hannibal nodded. His voice was a soft, soothing purr when he said, “It is always yours to choose, Will. I will leave you to your thoughts and go ring for Jimmy for you. Take your time, Will. There is no hurry.”

The inference stayed with Will long after Hannibal left, closing the door quietly behind him to leave Will alone, just as he asked.
He thought it might give him perspective. He thought being outside of Hannibal’s influence might grant him a moment to reflect on things objectively, but it didn’t work that way, not this time. Instead, he cleaned up slowly in the bath and found himself reliving the moments his mind had cataloged, heat haze or not. He soaked in the tub, every whispered word said as if for the first time, every loving touch trailing over him anew, every flash of heavy Alpha fangs bared in a grin filling him with warm, comfortable affection.

‘Greedy,’ Hannibal had purred, and Will flinched, touching his throat again.

For the first time in a long, long time he felt a familiar ache wrap its spindly, cold fingers around his heart and he shivered in its clutches, wondering if he was his father’s son after all, willing to sacrifice Hannibal’s future and happiness on the very altar he had worked so hard to fill.

Chapter 37

Hannibal imposed on Berger after ringing for Jimmy and took a bath downstairs in the washroom reserved for the servants.

“You’ve had some correspondence while you were indisposed,” Berger informed him.

“Leave it in the library for me, please. And have breakfast laid out there, something light but tempting,” Hannibal said, distracted. The hot water on the chafed, bruised skin of his groin was painful but he couldn’t regret the cause, nor the bruises, nor the scores Will’s fingernails had left on his back and flanks. The past days and nights he’d spent with Will were the most beautiful and cherished of his life; the small pain was a pleasure all its own in that regard.

He only hoped that Will, given time and distance to sort his emotions, would come to feel the same way.

“Consider it done, my Lord. I’ll bring your clothes down and help you dress after,” Berger offered.

“Just leave my things for me and get my suite set to rights, please, Berger. I think Will would be more settled if things return to normal as quickly as possible,” Hannibal said, scrubbing up with unusual intensity. He paused and pinned his valet with a look, asking, “Is Will’s suite in order?”

Berger nodded. “Yes, m’Lord, Price has kept it ready this whole time.”

“And Abigail?”

“Awake, my Lord, but not asking questions,” Berger said, frowning. “She ain’t said a word, not even to Emily; she just stands at the window hugging herself, staring out at the woods. Magistrate’s been here every day. He wants to take her—”

“He isn’t taking her anywhere,” Hannibal announced, splashing water up over his shoulders to rinse the soap away. “Make sure she knows that, if that’s what has her mute. And tell Price to start packing.”

“M’Lord?” Berger asked, at a loss.

“Pack, Berger,” Hannibal said. “I want us prepared to leave on a moment’s notice. Will is quite recovered and we are not safe here. The moment the Magistrate consents, we are leaving Marsham Heath.”

“Yes, m’Lord,” Berger said, leaving to do as he was told.

Hannibal finished his bath, eager to dress and rejoin his mate, to begin the intricate waltz of wooing Will back into his arms so they could face this dragon as it was meant to be faced.

Together.

Jimmy was an expert at reading Will’s mood and what he saw as he helped Will dress kept him quiet, though his expressive eyes said he was disturbed on Will’s behalf. Usually Will would unburden himself, but in this case he kept his silence, allowing Jimmy to choose his cuff links and even his pocket watch without comment. Will ran his finger over its face when Jimmy tucked it into his pocket, his blue eyes drifting to the others nestled in their shop box. A smile touched his lips before he knew it just thinking of how he’d confronted Hannibal in the washroom, the kiss they’d shared, how firmly he’d clung to his resolution to take things slowly until his heat had broken his determination like so many fragile teacups.
“We got word from the Capital about the journal,” Jimmy told him, brushing the fabric of his coat to smooth it. “There's someone working on translating it as of yesterday, my Lord. They couldn’t give me an estimate when they would finish, but they have started.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will said, his hand falling to press to his belly, the ache dull but present.

“His Lordship sent some pain powder for you, if you’re sore,” Jimmy said, delicately skirting the subject of Will’s heat.

“No, thank you, Jimmy, it’s bearable,” Will said, smiling at his friend. He cherished the ache, in all honesty, enjoying the proof that what had happened was real and not a feverish, heat-induced fantasy. “Has there been anything from my sister?”

“No word,” Jimmy said, mouth pursing. “This dog hair, I swear! It’s embedded in everything!”

Jimmy finished fussing and finally stepped back, clasping his hands together in front of him. Unable to bear it a moment longer, he asked, “Are you alright, my Lord?”

“Yes, Jimmy, I just have a lot to think about,” Will admitted, and he felt his age suddenly, felt young and uninformed, grasping at information which others older than he were already firmly in possession of. “I’m having difficulty ordering my thoughts.”

Jimmy nodded, pained. “I worry so much about you.”

“I know you do,” Will said, impulsively reaching out to grasp Jimmy’s hands. “I have something to discuss with Hannibal that’s weighing on my mind. I had hoped to prepare myself some beforehand, but I haven’t the least idea how to begin. We have an important decision to make together, he and I.”

That didn’t seem to relieve Jimmy’s mind, which didn’t surprise Will as it did little to set his own at ease, but his valet had an uncanny way of knowing when to close a subject, and he did so then, knowing Will would come to him if and when he needed to.

“Has Hannibal gone down?” Will asked, saying the syllables of his name with care, recalling the way he’d broken his husband’s name on sobbing moans, surging together in the heat of his bed. He shivered, shaking his head, relieved when Jimmy said, “He’s asked for breakfast in the library, my Lord. And he’s ordered us to pack.”

“Pack?” Will echoed, surprised.

“Yes,” Jimmy said, moving to begin gathering Will’s things. “He wants us ready to leave on a moment’s notice.”

“Has something happened?” Will asked, the worries and cares of his daily life as Lord Clarges shrouding his personal woes.

“According to the maids, the talk in Moseley is very grim regarding Abigail,” Jimmy said, moving to the dressing room. “I’m sure his Lordship is just taking precautions.”

“I’m sure he is,” Will said, concern wrinkling his brow. He excused himself, taking the stairs down to the library at a brisk pace, his nervousness at facing his husband after their heat-addled raptures numbing beneath the weight of his worry for Abigail’s future.

Winston barked a greeting, excited to see Will after their long separation. He bounded up from the floor, his bushy tail waving like a flag, and Will gratefully crouched to stroke his head. Hannibal’s gaze on him was a weighty touch drifting over his head and shoulders, searching him for clues to his mood. Will looked up at him, relaxing when he saw neither anger nor caution on Hannibal’s severe face. The still, smooth expression he always worse transformed in an instant with a soft, indulgent smile. It crinkled the corners of his amber eyes and let his heavy fangs peek out between his sculpted lips.

Will’s mouth curved in response, the urge irresistible when faced with his husband’s delight just to see him. The hurt was there, a caution lingering in his bond, but Hannibal was actively repressing it, determined not to dwell on troubling things.

“Don’t let him fool you, he was perfectly happy with the stable boys all this time,” Hannibal said, leaving his chair and approaching to hold out his hand to Will.

Will’s blue eyes flicked from his long fingers up to his half-lidded eyes. The smile still clung to Hannibal’s lips, quirking the corners of his mouth and wakening fine lines around his eyes.

Will accepted his offer, sliding his fingers into Hannibal’s in a touch half a caress. His nerves evaporated as those long, strong fingers clasped his own and tugged him gently to his feet, all the passion they’d spent in his bed somehow changing everything without changing the comfortable ease he found in his husband’s presence.
“The sight of you is the sun through the clouds on a dreary day,” Hannibal told him, and began to bring Will's fingers to his lips, pausing at the last moment to ask, “May I?”

“Yes,” Will said, his fingers tightening in a spasm when Hannibal's mouth whispered over his skin, laying a gentle, chaste kiss on his knuckles but still managing to bring entirely inappropriate thoughts to mind.

Nor was he alone in that, if the sparkle in Hannibal's amber eyes was any indication.

“You've been separated from me for barely an hour, Hannibal,” he softly scolded, squeezing those fingers back before tugging his hand free.

“When one is banished from paradise, every second is an eternity,” Hannibal sighed, grinning when Will smirked at him, affectionately exasperated. Hannibal gestured at the meal spread out for them and said, “Please, join me. You must be starving.”

Will nodded and took his seat across from Hannibal, his hand resting on Winston's head when the dog pushed his muzzle into Will's lap.

“How is Abigail?” he asked, realizing he'd lost the thread of the household in the midst of his heat. He grasped at normalcy, settling on a subject which was the furthest away from their active few days.

“Having a tray in her room,” Hannibal said, pouring a cup of tea for Will, entirely unbothered or embarrassed by what had passed between them. Because it was beautiful, and it always would be.

Will took his cup with a brushing touch and a murmured thanks, a small thrill shooting through him when Hannibal smiled in return, a world of promise in his eyes.

“She isn't speaking to anyone,” he said, reminding Will of his inquiry, “I wouldn't say it's shock, but she is certainly traumatized and terrified on too many fronts to adequately defend against.”

“I can imagine,” Will said, which earned him an amused look from his husband he didn't mean to draw. “Of course I can imagine, that's rather the problem. Have you checked on her?”

“I haven't seen her as yet. I thought we might do so together,” Hannibal told him, filling Will's plate with tidbits, small portions to tempt his appetite. They were both drawn, their resources burned up by Will's heat. It made the high arch of Hannibal's cheekbones even more stark and smudged dark circles beneath Will's tired blue eyes. “Berger has taken excellent care of her while we were indisposed and assures me she is healing up without complications. I have every reason to hope she will have only a minimal scar.”

“I don't suppose Hobbs has been found?” Will asked, giving Winston a final pat before taking up his tea. He was famished but strangely reluctant to eat, the hollow hunger inside of him a small penance for the secrets he kept.

“I believe we are no longer being involved in Magistrate Crawford's affairs now that we are sheltering Miss Hobbs, so I confess I do not know,” Hannibal told him, not nearly as interested in his own breakfast as he was in his husband. “Though I wish I did. It worries me to be kept blind of his whereabouts.”

Will found his gaze drawn to Hannibal over and again, to his hands with his long, fine fingers, to the perfect curve of his chin, to the sculpted perfection of his lips, and the way his hair fell. Hannibal's amber eyes met Will's and Will looked away with a blush.

Hannibal reached out and covered his hand, giving it a warm squeeze Will felt all the way to his toes.

“I've been catching up on my correspondence,” Hannibal said, gracing Will's hand with a soft kiss before releasing it to pluck up a letter. “Zeller questioned Miss Lass and she denies the event with Mrs. Hobbs ever happened.”

“She feared taking responsibility for it?” Will said, dismayed. “Did he offer assurances we would not bring charges against her?”

“He did,” Hannibal said, nodding. “She refused to admit anything of the sort happened. Which leaves us in a quandary, as the baby's birth was not registered.”

“Without Miss Lass to corroborate that Abigail is Melinda's child,” Will said, his stomach sinking, “we have no proof of who she really is.”

“Only our word,” Hannibal confirmed, a frown curving his firm mouth, “a birthmark only those in our family or employ have seen, and our private conversation with Louise Hobbs, who is now far beyond any capacity to lend credence to our claim.”
“Perhaps there is some confession?” Will asked, desperate to find a way around this. “She was so heavily burdened by what they had done, perhaps she mentioned it to someone or committed her conscience to paper?”

“We have no way of discovering it, if she has,” Hannibal said, his thoughts heavy in his eyes. “Unfortunately, Mr. Buddish is unable to begin any process of protection on the grounds that Abigail is my stepdaughter and must place an appeal through the courts.”

Will’s heart skipped, his concerns buried beneath his worry for Abigail.

“She will fall under the Magistrate’s disposal,” he said, disturbed.

“Yes, and the Magistrate is under the jurisdiction of the High Court, who are no doubt following this case with rabid interest,” Hannibal told him, idly pushing the letter towards Will in case he wanted to read it. “Perhaps now that we are both back from our all-too-brief holiday, we can be present for an interview and Magistrate Crawford can assist us in presenting Abigail to them in a favorable light.”

“Provided she decides to speak,” Will said, and took a fortifying sip of his tea. “Jack Crawford is a fair, just man. I have every faith his suspicion of Abigail will be satisfied once he speaks with her. It is the supposition of public opinion I fear. Should she claim to have no knowledge of what happened in that house, not everyone will believe her, not entirely.”

Hannibal nodded, but he smiled all the same and told him, “Never fear, Will. We will be there to support Abigail, I promise you that. To that end, I feel we should leave Marsham Heath as soon as we have satisfied the Magistrate’s suspicions.”

“Just take her?” Will asked.

“Grandfather’s gathering will be upon us before we know it and there is much to be done at Hartford,” Hannibal said. “We could bring her home, if you both agree.”

“Hobbs will surely look for her there,” Will said, stricken at the thought. “And there has been no headway in finding Matthew or discovering who tried to harm me?”

Hannibal shook his head, solemn. “There is a frustrating lack of leads and so far Matthew has remained hidden. It is, in truth, no safer for you there now than it was when we left, but it is certainly not safe for either you or Abigail here and I would prefer you to be in familiar territory with people who know and love you if we must face two threats.”

Will nodded, the movement stiff, his eyes weighty with thoughts.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you, Will,” Hannibal said, reaching out to smooth Will’s clenched knuckles until his hand loosened, the tender regard in his touch pushing back Will’s unease. “We will give them no circumstances to be used against you. It terrifies me when I think of how vulnerable you were this entire time. I will assign guards to you both if I must.”

Hannibal pulled his hand back with reluctance, striving to give Will the room he needed when every piece of himself demanded to be closer, to wrap Will in himself and be his shield against the world.

But that would only do a disservice to his wily little mate and he respected Will’s talents far too much to indulge himself in such an effort.

“What will become of Abigail? How will we manage to procure a wardship without bringing her back to public attention or betraying Melinda’s secret?” Will asked, brows drawing down. His knowledge of family law was limited by the Hartford library, which was abundant in medical texts and other interests of the Lecter family, few of which included law.

“I am friendly with several court officials,” Hannibal said, his amber eyes hooding. “I will explain the situation to them. She is a minor whose father is either dead or soon to be, and they would much rather she become our responsibility than dependent on the government for support.”

Will nodded, the movement stiff, his eyes weighty with thoughts.

“There will be no containing the gossip,” Will mused, brows pulling together in thought, “considering it involves multiple murders and the detectives were here to take their own reports back.”

“Considering what Hobbs was doing and who he did it to, there was little hope of avoiding exposure,” Hannibal said, sipping his tea and wincing at how cold it had gone. He freshened it, eyeing Will’s cup until Will took an accommodating sip. “Which is why I am not reading the papers. We must brace ourselves for unpleasantness. Abigail is the only one to survive, both as a member of her family and as her father’s victim. Should they take Hobbs alive and hold a trial, she will certainly be called upon to testify.”

“How horrifying,” Will breathed, and hoped in the darkest corner of his heart that Hobbs would, indeed, refuse to be taken alive, just as he’d said. “Is there truly no other way to prove her innocence?”
“Not beyond a shadow of a doubt,” Hannibal reminded him. “Assuming she is innocent. She has already been condemned in the minds of this village; it will be worse in the Capital. We must do better for her than her father did, Will. We must give her a legacy she can thrive on.”

“Change her surname, legalize your protection of her,” Will said, nudging the food on his plate without appetite, “ensure that any charges are dropped so the future will not trouble her.”

He lifted his head to look at Hannibal, thoughtful but determined, and said, “You’re right—we must do better for Abigail, for her sake, and for the sake of Louise Hobbs. Abigail has been failed enough by those who should have loved and protected her. We should not count ourselves among them.”

“We will see what Abigail thinks,” Hannibal said, urging him to eat. “We will have our uncomfortable conversation, ask her if she is willing to give her statement to Jack, and then we shall leave the moment we are able. The further we take her from Moseley, the safer Abigail is.”

Will nodded, and when Hannibal added some fruit to his plate, he ate with increasing appetite, his mind gratefully seizing on this new crisis in order to stave off the inevitable issue of their bond.

The parlor was prepared for their discussion. Emily, one of the maids who was close with Abigail, had procured her clean clothing and she came down looking pale and wan in a dark wool dress, the stitches stark against her long throat.

“Miss Hobbs, my Lords,” Mr. Thatcher said, promptly leaving the three of them in the parlor where Louise Hobbs had wept and confessed her sins.

“Abigail, please, have a seat,” Will said, moving away from Hannibal’s side to take a step towards her.

Abigail moved slowly, her blue eyes flicking from Will to Hannibal and back again as if she feared a stern lecture. Will wasn’t surprised. Hannibal was watching her with the usual smooth absence of expression he wore when he was struggling with powerful emotions. His bond fed Will a chaos of guilt, elation, worry and yearning, all at war with one another just seeing this child of Melinda’s moving through the world with wide, frightened eyes.

She sat, smoothing her skirts around her, mute but watchful and wildly afraid.

“I am so sorry, Abigail, that we were not able to see you when you woke,” Will said, settling across from her. Hannibal stood at the fireplace, his elbow on the mantle, silently absorbed in his thoughts. “You must have been very frightened, but I have every confidence Mr. Berger has taken excellent care of you.”

She nodded, her fingers lifting to skim over the wound on her neck, her blue eyes sliding to Hannibal once again.

“That is a relief. We are very glad to find you so recovered,” Will said, smiling to reassure her. He followed her gaze to Hannibal and said, “Hannibal?”

He stirred, straightening and turning to finally meet Abigail’s curious blue eyes.

“Yes, we are,” he echoed, a small smile lifting his lips. He moved away from the fireplace in careful control of himself, trying not to appear the tall and rather intimidating Alpha he was. He eased down at Will’s side, searching Abigail’s face to find the familiar echoes of the woman he’d loved as a young man. “You look so like your mother, Abigail.”

She swallowed hard, a tremor running through her. She dropped her hands to her lap and clenched them in the rough-spun material of her skirt to hide it. When she blinked tears slipped down her freckled cheeks. Her mouth trembled, all the words she wanted to say bottled up behind her clenched teeth. When she finally spoke, she broke her long and lonely silence with a strangled, harsh whisper.

“You’re my father, aren’t you?”

It was all Will could do not to comfort her, raw as his own emotions were and seeing a child so deeply uncertain. He could imagine all too easily why she had not spoken to now, why these words had to be the first she said after the tragedy that had occurred.

Because Hannibal had to be her father. That was what had started this whole terrible catastrophe. If he wasn’t, then everything that had happened could have been prevented.

It broke Will’s heart to think she would hold herself responsible for any part of it, but it wasn’t his place to say. He stayed silent, offering the only support he could by taking Hannibal’s hand in his.
“I wish I could say that I am, Abigail,” Hannibal said, drawing a deep breath to brace himself for unpleasant truths. He held her hurt blue eyes, watching tears shimmer and well over as he broke her heart in pieces, “but I am not your father, not in the way you hope. Not in the way your mother imagined.”

“But she said—” she cut herself off, dropping her chin, her fingers working restlessly in her skirt, clenching and twisting the material. “She said you gave me away. She said you didn’t want me.”

“Abigail, no, that’s not true,” Will said, heart sinking. “I know you must be disappointed—”

“Who am I?” she asked, anguished, and lifted her head to look at the ceiling as if imploring the gods themselves to answer. But they didn’t. They never spoke so plainly; it was left to Hannibal to say the words she needed to hear and he did so in a gentle purr, soothing and soft, “You are the daughter of a beautiful, kind, and delightful girl who would have traded anything in the world to have raised you these past sixteen years, Abigail. Her name was Melinda Foster. She was my wife.”

“I don’t understand,” she said, her fingers tightening in her skirt. She wiped at her face with her other hand, impatient with her own tears. “I don’t understand.”

“Your mother was my dearest childhood friend,” Hannibal said, the soft Alpha rumble in his voice calming Abigail’s deep distress by just a fraction. “When I had lost everything, she gave me her hand and encouraged me. When I had no hope for the future, she gave me her love. She was there for me when I needed her most, that was the kind of wonderful person she was.”

Abigail stilled, her tears slowing. She managed to look at Hannibal, trembling and uncertain but determined.

“Unfortunately, when she needed me most, I was not there for her, in turn,” Hannibal said, shifting to lean forward, holding Abigail’s sad blue eyes. “We had an understanding we would marry as soon as she was of age and I had finished medical school, but... I am sorry, Abigail. I wish there was some way to spare you, but the truth of the matter is that in my absence your mother found comfort with another.”

Abigail’s eyes widened to painful proportions and Will shifted to take her hand, offering her something to cling to. Her fingers squeezed down on his so hard it hurt, but he held her fast, because if she could bear to see her dreams and hopes crash down around her like a straw house blown in the wind, then he could bear to watch it happen, if not for Abigail’s sake then for the sake of Louise Hobbs.

“You mean I’m—I’m—”

“No, Abigail,” Hannibal said, releasing Will’s hand to rub his palms over his face, struggling to find the right words, as he so often did when speaking from the heart. “I married her to spare you both the stigma of that circumstance. But she was very ill, very weak, and I returned to care for her far too late to turn the tide in her illness, but you...”

He dropped his hands, a gleam shimmering in his eyes that Will ached to soothe, his heart breaking for both of them, for the past that couldn’t be fixed and the time that was lost forever.

Just as their own had been.

“You, Abigail,” Hannibal said, releasing a shaky breath with a smile, “I was able to save you. You were small and so fragile, but perfect in every way.”

She shook her head, strained and broken as she warbled, “Then why did you send me away?”

Hannibal’s mouth tightened with pain. He stirred as if to reach out for her and Will eased back, smoothing his hand down Hannibal’s spine in silent urging.

Hannibal touched her cautiously, folding his longer fingers over her hand to clasp it tightly in both of his own.

“I sent you away because I could not bear the guilt I felt with your mother’s passing,” Hannibal whispered, unwilling to give her the details, not yet, not when she had only just been restored to him. “I held you in my arms and felt her loss like a piece of myself had been torn away from me. I was half out of my mind with grief. I fled to the Capital that very night and left everything behind me, including you.”

She shivered, striving not to cry, shoulders squared and chin up. But her hand clutched his, grasping for support, a child’s reach for balance in a world gone awry.

“I was told you had been given to a family of landed gentry,” Hannibal whispered, grateful for the gentle rub of Will’s hand over his shoulders, smoothing the cloth of his jacket and calming him. “I was told you were given the best of everything and I should not concern myself with you. Blinded by my guilt as I was, I allowed myself to be persuaded that you were living in the best possible world, Abigail, and I had no right or reason to impose on you, having left you so long without my presence.”
“I know your mother believed her secret had somehow escaped,” Will murmured, resting his other hand on Hannibal’s leg, “but we had no idea at all. Even the Duke himself did not realize. Your mother’s confession—”

“She’s not my mother,” Abigail said, her voice thick. She tugged her hand free of Hannibal’s, withdrawing even as her face closed up, hiding her thoughts. “And you’re not my father, no more than he was.”

“Abigail,” Will said, a note of reproach in his voice. “The actions your mother took to raise you as her daughter were not admirable, even if done with good intentions, but she loved you so very much she was willing to risk losing you by telling you the truth. Sometimes, truth is the cruelest and most difficult thing to manage with someone you love.”

“Cruel and difficult is what she did to me,” Abigail said, wiping at her face with such force it must have been painful, but no match for what she was feeling. “If she hadn’t stolen me, I might have grown up with a good family! If she hadn’t been so selfish, he never would have become so twisted and sick! If she had just done what was right, then I wouldn’t have had to watch him kill her!”

She covered her face with her hands, shoulders shaking and her entire slender frame trembling with the depths of her sorrow.

“It’s all my fault!” she moaned, and Will moved to deny it, to comfort her, but Hannibal slid from his seat to settle next to her. He put his arms around her, tucking her head beneath his jaw and rocking her. His eyes met Will’s, entreatying, and Will shifted to crouch before her, folding her small hands in his.

“It wasn’t your fault, Abigail,” he said, blinking back tears, he ached for her so much. “Your father is sick. He used you as an excuse, not a reason. There’s a difference, Abigail. He was always going to do what he did, whether you were there or not.”

“But he killed them because of me,” she wept, wiping her face. “He told me so! He had to kill them so he wouldn’t kill me!”

“Abigail,” Hannibal said, her name a rumble of sound deep in his chest. “He is a sick, sick man, a dangerous man. I cannot imagine how frightened you must have been.”

He exchanged a long look with Will, who wet his lips and chose his words carefully, speaking in a slow, even cadence designed to calm her.

“You needn’t carry such a burden alone, Abigail,” he told her. “Hannibal and I will do everything in our power to shield you from what has happened, but we must know the truth. Magistrate Crawford believes you were involved in your father’s actions, that you had some knowledge of them or even assisted him.”

She snuffled, her fingers twitching in Will’s in reflexive response.

“We need to know the truth, Abigail,” Will pressed. “So that we may best protect you.”

“He thinks I helped him?” she whispered, and Hannibal loosened his embrace, fishing his handkerchief from his pocket to offer her. She slid one hand out of Will’s to take it but held fast to him with the other, terrified.

“He has his suspicions,” Will said, hesitating before adding, “as does the city of Moseley.”

Abigail’s blue eyes widened in horror, betrayal written in their vivid depths, her mouth falling open in shock.

“They think I would... do that?” she asked, a harsh whisper of disbelief that held a crack of tears. “They think I would just ignore it as he murdered my friends?”

“It was rather worse than that, Abigail,” Hannibal said, drawing a deep breath.

“Hannibal,” Will warned, catching his eye. “Perhaps if we let Magistrate Crawford give her the details?”

Hannibal nodded, gleaning his purpose. It was cruel to Abigail, but there were times when cruelty was a kindness and in this case it would work in Abigail’s favor. If and when Jack asked about the smokehouse, her reaction would be genuine and might convince him of her innocence, at least.

“He’s going to take me away, isn’t it?” she asked, trying to settle the understanding of it, trying to prepare for the worst.

“We won’t let that happen,” Will assured her. “We will be here with you, I promise you.”

Hannibal eased back, keeping one arm over her shoulders, a reassuring comfort she did her best not to draw on. It pained him to see her striving to be brave, to be strong—truly her mother’s daughter.

“What’s going to happen to me?”
Will flinched from the raw pain in that question, the hopeless whisper of a child who had lost everything in one fell swoop—the only mother she had known and loved, the father who had loved her beyond all reason, the family and friends she had once had, and the community she had been a part of. All of it was lost to her now. She was a tiny boat adrift in an ocean of uncertainty, paddleless, directionless, and lost.

“We lack the proof to claim guardianship of you as my stepdaughter,” Hannibal told her, frowning, “but I will be meeting with my solicitor to see what can be done for you, Abigail. We had hoped to leave here as soon as possible, today if we can, and take you home with us to Hartford House.”

A glimmer of hope reached her blue eyes, the barest flicker Will was desperate to feed.

“It’s where you were born, Abigail,” he told her, coaxing a slight smile from her. He didn’t dare mention the Fosters, but he made a mental note to appeal to them on her behalf and reunite her with her blood relatives if at all possible.

“Is my father there? My real father, I mean,” she said, embarrassed. She wiped at her face with the handkerchief, avoiding eye contact as pink filled her pale cheeks.

“Your mother never confided your father’s name,” Hannibal told her, much to Will’s surprise. He covered it as best he was able before Abigail could see. “Unfortunately, we may never know who he was. But Will and I, we will be your fathers, Abigail.”

She dropped her hand, surprised by the statement, her blue eyes shifting from Hannibal to Will and back again.

“And we will do everything in our power to ensure a happy future for you,” Will promised, shifting to sit at her other side.

The oddest feeling swept over him when Hannibal leaned closer to rest his hand on Will’s back, folding the two of them in the warmth of his affections. It was a feeling of belonging, solid and true, and it reached all the way down to the deepest part of him. He held Abigail’s hand in his, a daughter he never expected but welcomed all the same. He met Hannibal’s amber gaze and they both smiled, able to find some hope in the snaring thorns of Garret Jacob Hobbs’ madness and bring some light into the darkness he’d forged.

Their small moment of closeness was broken by Mr. Thatcher’s arrival, and his statement of, “Magistrate Crawford has arrived, my Lords,” was interrupted by the man himself.

Jack Crawford entered the room with the stern, set look of a bull being sent to the ring, horns lowered and broad shoulders squared, bracing for a fight.

It was a fight Hannibal had no intentions of giving him if he could help it. If they were to bring Abigail out of this unscathed, they would need Jack Crawford’s sympathy and good regard.

“Lords Clarges,” he said, coming to a stop near the fireplace to look at them, wary unhappiness in his dark eyes. “I’m glad to see your household has recovered from its recent inconvenience.”

“It was no inconvenience,” Hannibal said, holding his gaze. “Though it would appear we have inconvenienced you, Magistrate. Have you caught Mr. Hobbs?”

“No,” Jack said, his worries making him short. “To that end, I would like to speak to Miss Hobbs.”

Abigail flinched, trembling anew.

“We would certainly be happy to allow you an interview,” Will said, adding, “With us present, of course.”

“Alone,” Jack insisted, and when Will cocked his head, preparing to dress him down, he added, “I trust you will understand, my Lords, that I cannot have this interview tainted by the pair of you coaching her responses.”

“Jack,” Hannibal said, offended. “That you would even suggest such a thing is incredibly unlike you.”

“I beg your pardon, Lord Clarges, but there is a unit being dispatched from the Capital to come collect Miss Hobbs,” Jack said, his unhappiness turning downright grim. “In what capacity depends on what she tells me here.”

Will’s mouth tightened but he gave a short nod to Hannibal, both of them comforting Abigail as best they could.

“So, please,” Jack said, watching them carefully, “allow me to do my job so we can find the best way forward.”

Abigail watched anxiously as Will stood, worry rising in her wide eyes.

“We’ll be just outside the door,” Will promised her, squeezing her hand. He angled a hard look at Jack and said, “and Magistrate Crawford will handle you with the care a recovering victim requires. Won’t you, Jack?”

“I am not a heartless man, Lord Clarges,” Jack said, firm and steady, “only a just one.”
Will couldn’t decide if it was a threat or a reassurance, but considering what he knew of Jack, it could be both. He held the man’s gaze as Hannibal rose, both of them reluctant to leave Abigail but lacking the legal recourse to prevent her interrogation. Mr. Thatcher let them out into the hallway, closing the door on one last glimpse of Abigail’s terrified face.

Will had to use every ounce of his formidable willpower to keep from charging back in there. Hannibal, too, struggled, the pair of them waiting tense and silent in the hall until Will said, “They’re sending someone.”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, arms crossed over his chest, his amber gaze on the door.

“To take her _where_?” Will asked, agitated enough to start pacing. Over and over behind his lids he saw Louise Hobbs bleeding to death, willing to die for the child she loved. He could not let her sacrifice go to waste. He _would not_ let it go to waste.

“They will take her into protective custody and hold her in surety against Hobbs’ capture,” Hannibal said, uttering one of the possibilities.

“For how long?” Will asked, his blue eyes searching Hannibal’s stern face and finding only quiet dismay, as if it was inevitable.

“Until they are satisfied,” Hannibal said, reaching out to grasp Will’s shoulders. He looked down at him, his amber eyes almost glowing in the dim light of the hallway, his comforting Alpha scent like a soft blanket folding around Will, as soothing as the strong arms that moved to hold him fast against Hannibal’s chest.

Will’s arms rose, clasping Hannibal’s shoulders, his hand wrapping around Hannibal’s nape to twine in his hair as he leaned into him. His voice was muffled against Hannibal’s cheek when he asked, “Is there nothing we can do to stop it?”

“All we can do is wait and see what Jack brings away from this meeting,” Hannibal told him, Will’s sweet scent calming him, both of them shoring the other up, moorings firmly grounded in the bedrock of their affections. “I will see what I can accomplish in the Capital. There must be some protection for a minor we can be invoke. We will not sit idle and wait to see what happens.”

Will closed his eyes, squeezing Hannibal to him, the strength of his feelings for this man bringing tears to his eyes.

“When this is settled,” he said, tipping his head down to push his nose against Hannibal’s neckerchief, scenting the earthy musk of his skin. “There is something I need to tell you.”

Hannibal drew back just a touch, rubbing Will’s back in long sweeps, his amber eyes searching out Will’s with questions mulling in their molten depths.

“From the way you’ve tensed, I cannot imagine it is something easy to say,” he observed, reaching up to smooth Will’s curls. “This thing you have to tell me... is it why you’ve withdrawn from me, Will?”

Will nodded, lips pressed into a thin line as if to keep his confession from escaping him.

Will’s distress was a slender hook in Hannibal’s gut, tugging and painful. He pressed a kiss to Will’s forehead and sighed, caressing his cheeks.

“If it burdens you so,” he murmured, both hands moving to settle on the gentle curve of Will’s hips, “would it relieve you if I said you needn’t tell me?”

Will’s brow furrowed in a spasm of surprise but he only shook his and admitted, “No, I need to tell you. It’s important to me that you know the truth.”

“Sometimes,” Hannibal said, whispering Will’s own words back to him, “truth is the cruelest and most difficult thing to manage.”

“Yes,” Will said, wetting his lower lip with his tongue. “I have no desire to bring you harm, Hannibal.”

“Nor will you,” Hannibal said, a sad smile lifting the corners of his mouth. “I have everything I could ever want or desire all in you, Will. Nothing will change my mind about that, or about you.”

He tugged Will’s arm free and found his hand, clasping it to bring it to his lips.

“Nothing you say can change my mind,” he repeated, kissing Will’s hand. “And the only words of yours that will part me from you are the ones you are always free to use, though I pray you never will.”

They shifted away from one another when the door opened and Jack emerged, frowning and weary, rubbing his forehead as if it pained him. His dark eyes were sympathetic when they met Will’s and he said with a note of apology, “She didn’t know what he was doing.”
“We could have told you that,” Will said, moving to look into the parlor where Abigail sat, white as a sheet, her face blank.

“Are you satisfied, Magistrate?”

“More than I was before,” Jack said, though he didn’t sound pleased.

“Satisfied enough to send a statement to the courts?” Hannibal inquired.

“I will send an addendum to my inquiry,” Jack told them, heaving a sigh. “I will offer my professional opinion that Abigail was not involved in her father’s crimes and should not be charged as an accomplice. Naturally, they will wish to speak with her, but given her status as a victim and a minor, I am certain it can be done with discretion.”

“We want every effort given to preserve her reputation,” Will insisted, settling his hand at the base of Will’s spine. “And add to your addendum that we will begin the process of wardship at once.”

“Having the support of powerful friends will certainly be a mark in her favor,” Jack said, thoughtful. “She will have to be taken into protective custody as a witness to her father’s crimes, however. Until her father is caught or killed, she is not safe even in Marsham Heath.”

“We will take her with us,” Hannibal said. “We will leave within the hour.”

“That simply isn’t possible, Lord Clarges,” Jack said, the finality in his tone bringing a chill to Will’s heart. “You have no legal claim to this child, not yet, not now. In the eyes of the law she is still her father’s daughter. She must be taken into custody until you can sue for guardianship.”

“Jack,” Hannibal said, deeply troubled. “I have only just found her again after nearly seventeen years.”

“I assure you, I am not without sympathy,” Jack said, pained but compelled to work within the structure of the law he served so faithfully. “But there is little recourse. If you can’t show me proof of your connection to Abigail Hobbs, then I can’t allow you to take her anywhere, Lord Clarges. In the eyes of the law, she is a stranger to you both. Abigail Hobbs is and will remain a citizen of Moseley under court custody until you can prove you have a legal right to make decisions on her behalf.”

Jack stared at him, his dark eyes heavy with distaste at what he had to do. “Your intentions will be conveyed to the Justice when we reach the Capital,” he said, his shoulders tight with tension. “She will be housed accordingly until the legalities are settled.”

Hannibal could only stare at him with reproach, unhappy and grim but knowing there was little else to be done.

“Hannibal, please,” Will said, laying his hand over Hannibal’s heart. “Please.”

“I will accompany Abigail and make arrangements for her care in person,” he said, holding Jack’s gaze. “You will escort us, Magistrate?”

“I will,” Jack said, solemn.

Hannibal looked in at Abigail before he looked at his mate, the ache in his heart bleeding through his bond as he whispered, “I will take care of this.”

Will nodded, his smile as firm as his confidence in his husband.

“I need you to go to Hartford—” he grasped Will’s hand when he started to protest, firmly overriding him with, “I need you to go where you can be under Grandfather’s care.”

“But surely Chelsea House—”

“Please, Will,” Hannibal said, a note of pleading in his tone. “I can only split my worries so many ways and I need to know you’re safe. Return to Grandfather, tell him what I’m about, and I will be home to join you before you realize it.”

Will nodded, seeing the reason in it but resenting it all the same.

“I would ask for five of your men to escort my husband back to Hartford,” Hannibal said, stepping back and straightening his coat, retreating into familiar reserve that had always served him so well in the Capital. “They will be compensated handsomely for their time. I expect you can draw on Blackwall to cover their absence?”

Will nodded, seeing the reason in it but resenting it all the same.

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“It will be arranged,” Jack said, crossing his arms behind his back to clasp his hands together. “This is poor gratitude for the assistance you gave me in discovering who was taking our children, my Lords, and I am sorry for it. I will offer my support in every way I am able as her case is reviewed.”

“We realize your hands are tied,” Will said, casting an anxious glance at Abigail, her silence returning with the distant stare of the traumatized. “It is a sorry situation, but we will set it right. Perhaps there is something more we can do in the matter of finding Mr. Hobbs?”
Hannibal picked up his meaning and said, “There’s a man I can recommend, a hunter who rarely fails when he is given a task. I cannot guarantee Hobbs will survive being caught by him, but I can guarantee he will be caught.”

Jack’s mouth pursed in thought but he nodded and said, “Honestly, Lord Clarges, right now I’m not certain I could guarantee his survival if I caught him, but it would go better for Abigail if he was taken alive to confess to his crimes, and to her innocence.”

A bleak and bottomless sense of loss gripped Hannibal as he gazed first at his husband, then at the daughter he was set to lose all over again. He held himself in check, trying to be strong for their sakes, and said, “I suppose we should be on our way.”

It took the entire day to get circumstances settled regarding Abigail Hobbs. Mr. Buddish accompanied Hannibal and Jack on a full day of meetings with his connections in the judicial system. He had to use every bit of his formidable sway as Lord Clarges and the future Duke of Westvale to arrange housing outside of that routinely used for minors under government care. None of the Justices could understand Hannibal’s pressing need to embroil himself in the life of a troubled young woman who would be plagued by scandal to her grave, but after hearing how he had saved her life, they eventually agreed to have Abigail safely settled in Our Gods of Unity Cenobium adjacent to the Ministry of Justice.

Hannibal provided a generous donation to their mother Church and managed to procure a beautifully-appointed room that Abigail, smart girl that she was, promptly inspected and said, “It’s wonderful, but it still makes me feel like a prisoner.”

“You aren’t a prisoner, Abigail, you’re under protection until your father is found,” Hannibal reminded her.

“And until they decide I didn’t do anything,” she said, bitter. She hugged herself, too worried and upset to be soothed by the small but lavish apartment she was given.

“Mr. Buddish has already begun preparing your statement,” Hannibal said, checking the decorative ironwork over the windows and finding it all quite sound and solid. “You are no less a victim for having survived and my own statement regarding the danger to your life will do a great deal to convince them that you were every bit as much a victim as any of the girls he has murdered.”

“Lord Clarges,” the All-Mother Superior said, serene but intimidating in their long robes and elaborate wimple. “It is time for you to leave, now. We will take very good care of your Abigail.”

“Please, just one moment more,” Hannibal asked, noting several more Cenobites lingering in the hallway outside of the thick, reinforced door. They would maintain a vigil there until the courts called for her and were, he’d been amply assured, more than capable of defending against any threat. Abigail would remain a nervous sparrow caged from flight and there was nothing more he could do about it for the moment.

“I must leave you, now, Abigail,” he said, all but chased from her room by their disapproving, stern stares. He took Abigail’s hand and held it, willing her to meet his gaze. When she did, he assured her, “I will be working to secure legal guardianship of you. The Justice has restricted any visitation at all until everything is settled, so Will and I, unfortunately, will not be able to relieve your tedium. But they did say I could provide for you, and I will see to it that something arrives daily to lighten your burden.”

She smiled, wan and sad, and said, “You don’t have to do this... I’m not even your daughter, not really.”

“Blood is the least of what makes a family,” Hannibal told her, smiling until she smiled back, a genuine one this time.

“Wh-what about my mother’s family?” she asked, her brow wrinkling up in thought. “The Fosters?”

“I will speak with them,” Hannibal said, releasing her hand after a warm squeeze. “Perhaps you can meet them? Would you like that?”

She nodded, hopeful and young but striving to be brave.

As Hannibal moved to the door, she called his name, nervously saying, “Could you apologize to Lord Clarges for me?”

Hannibal’s brow rose in question, wondering at how embarrassed and mortified she seemed.

“T-that day I left Marsham Heath, I said some things to him,” she admitted, clasping her hands together in front of her to still their trembling. “Some very unkind things. Could you tell him I’m sorry? I wish I hadn’t said any of it. I was so upset and I thought... I thought he was lying to me. Please, tell him thank you for being so kind to me, and that I’m sorry.”
“Knowing my husband,” Hannibal said, a smile curling his lips when he thought of Will's somber expression transforming in an impish grin, "he has already forgiven you. He knows a person's heart almost better than they know it themselves. But I will tell him, Abigail. Try not to fret too much, knowing we are on your side and fighting to keep you safe.”

It was painful to leave her there, but she was safe and as comfortable as he could make her. With no other recourse, Hannibal accompanied the All-Mother Superior back towards the Cenobium gates.

“How do you pray, Lord Clarges?” they inquired, tall enough to look him in the eye, an lifetime’s worth of soothing human suffering coloring the words they spoke.

“Not with purpose,” he admitted, running a tired hand over his face. “But I might begin to, if it will help me sort this mess.”

“Messes are not the gods’ business to sort,” they said, smiling. “We get ourselves in, we get ourselves back out again, but we needn’t do it alone. We are here to help one another, in the end, as we are helping you.”

“Tell that to my pocketbook,” Hannibal said, somewhat surprised when he got a chuckle instead of offense. Curious, he asked, “You Cenobites believe you’re divine, don’t you? That the body of an Omega is the blending of male and female into one holy vessel?”

“We believe that we are all vessels of the divine,” they said, coming to a stop at the massive iron gates that closed the fortress of their Cenobium off from the world. “When we reach out to help one another, when we forgive, when we ease suffering and nurse wounds, that is what makes us gods, Lord Clarges. That is what it means to be holy—to make a difference in the world around you and bring positive change.”

Hannibal nodded, much more comfortable being a god than relying on one.

“My charge as a physician is to do no harm,” Hannibal said, and trailed off, thinking of how little he had applied that charge to Will in all of his youthful tenderness, unformed clay that Hannibal shaped and hardened in the fire of his irrational beliefs. The same beliefs that had, perhaps, prevented him from being able to connect to Will as he longed for. “All-Mother Superior, might I ask you something of a personal nature?”

“All-Mother,” they said, cocking their noble head, “I have brought babies into this world and washed dead men in their last moments—every moment of life is of a personal nature to me.”

Hannibal glanced around, but they were quite alone in the thickening dusk, the soft glow of the gas globes beyond the gates casting faint light back at them.

“All-Mother,” he said, raising his earnest eyes to theirs, “is there any reason you know of, any phenomena that you have encountered that would prevent an Alpha-Omega bond?”

The All-Mother’s brows rose beneath their wimple, but they gamely answered, “Not unless a bond has already been formed with another. Is there some concern that your spouse has not bonded with you, my Lord?”

“There’s... nothing,” Hannibal said, gesturinghelplessly. “No, not that, there is something but it’s not like I assumed it would be.”

“An Alpha-Omega bond has long been documented as being every bit as important to the bonded pair as one’s lungs or heart, or mind, my Lord,” they said, concerned. “Should you bond, there will be no doubt that you have done so. We have seen bonded couples perish within moments of one another, and pairs who have willed the other back to health with the force of their bond. It is no trifling thing.”

“I saw my husband through his last heat, but despite everything...” Hannibal said, uncertain what had gone wrong. “Would it be possible for an unbonded Omega to prevent a bond when marked?”

The All-Mother cocked their head again, weighing the answer carefully, “It is, from all studies, an instinctive reaction. I have never heard of anyone being able to deliberately prevent a bond when the proper instincts are triggered.”

“Then the only answer is that he has already formed a bond?” Hannibal asked, stricken, his stomach sinking with wretched despair.

“There are other types of bonds, Lord Clarges,” the All-Mother said, smoothing their robes against the strengthening wind. “Some are formed young, others formed in adolescence, all dependent on circumstances. I’ve seen such things serving on the Continent in adolescent Omegas taken as prisoners. I have also seen it here, in Omegan children who have been victimized by their Alpha role model.”
Hannibal paled, none of Bedelia’s expert instruction preparing him for such unhappy truths.

“What do you mean, in children?” he pressed, worriedly imaging his mate’s childhood under the Earl of Reddig’s heavy hand.

“In life-threatening situations, in moments of great stress and fear, an Omega can imprint to the most hostile Alpha in an effort to save themselves,” the All-Mother said, “I’ve seen similar trauma provoke Alphas to bond with a distressed Omega. Such bonds are formed under extremes of pressure and are... regrettable and ugly in the result.”

Hannibal swallowed hard, the incident on the lane coming immediately to mind. He touched his cheek, the scab rough beneath his fingers. It was too recent an event, however, and when he looked deeper, one moment stood out above the others.

That morning so long ago when he’d turned on Will with frustration and unwarranted savagery and had cut him to the quick with his nasty comments. He had, gods help him, put his hands on Will in that moment, shaking him within an inch of his life over nothing more than his smile. It was an action that had no doubt terrified him, and Hannibal recalled with clarity the wide-eyed, stark fear on Will’s face when he’d whimpered, ‘Alpha!’

“How do such bonds present?” he asked, dreading the answer because surely, surely it was not possible. Surely he was grasping at straws and it was some failing of his, not this ugly mirror of something that should have been beautiful.

“Physically, at first,” the All-Mother answered, gradually stony-faced as they spoke. “Illness, distress as their mind distorts to the desires of the Alpha at fault. It acts as a protective mechanism, feeling what they feel and knowing when their Alpha is angry or unhappy—it can quite literally save an Omega’s life... but I have seen pitiful creatures made as a result. It is a terrible tragedy.”

“Gods,” Hannibal breathed, spots dancing before his eyes. Will had been ill, he remembered. Hannibal had thought he would return to Hartford House to bear tales and instead he’d gone straight up to his suite, missing dinner entirely. “Please, gods, no, it can’t be...”

“I highly doubt, my Lord Clarges, that such a thing has been done to your Marquess,” All-Mother Superior said, nearly as upset by the idea of it as Hannibal himself. “It is a perverted and twisted thing, the culmination of extremely violent circumstances or a lifetime of abuse. Your Marquess is a nobleman, born to a very fine family. You yourself are no sadist who would abuse him, even had that been the case. It simply isn’t possible that this could happen to him.”

Hannibal closed his eyes, seeing those scars on Will’s body, hearing the sharp, scornful certainty in his voice when he’d said, ‘I have spent the entirety of my life lamenting the gender of my birth. It took my father years to make me understand how offensive I and others like me are to the world. Did you think that it was my dream to end up with someone who loathes me and everything I am? That I hoped to leave my father’s house as I was and find myself just as despised, faced with a different type of violence that was no less painful...’

Will had been conditioned since birth by his father’s hateful doctrine and had scars on his skin to remind him every day of his life that his place in the world was below that of an Alpha. He had been primed for such a thing, and Hannibal could even believe it had been deliberate. As deliberate as handing an Omegan child to a man who loathed them, a cruel action almost guaranteed to ruin what little chance for happiness Will had.

And Hannibal, in his ignorance and pride, had unwittingly forced Will into bonding with him through sheer terrified self-preservation, demanding that Will be invisible to him, absent, anything but the person he was perceived by Hannibal to be.

Gods help them all, he had done exactly that. He had lived in Hartford House like a stranger, in his own words. Unseen, unheard, and burdened with a bond he’d never once spoken of.

‘There is something I need to tell you...’ he’d said, tense and worried and worn from hiding it for so long.

“How does one undo it?” Hannibal whispered, his voice strained and cracking from the pain welling up deep within his heart. It was breaking, he knew. It hurt so profoundly that his heart was surely breaking, and all of his hope for Will’s happiness was flooding out of the cracks. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was precisely the reason they could not bond, precisely what had happened.

He had happened.

“Can it be broken?” he asked, pleading. “Can it be healed?”
“Not that I have ever seen, Lord Clarges,” the All-Mother said, solemn. “It is as much a bond as one formed under pleasant circumstances, unfortunately permanent until one or the other dies which, in such sad cases, is usually the Omega and rather sooner than Nature would like.”

“And the Omegas who have suffered from them?” Hannibal pressed, so deeply disturbed that he could not meet their gaze. “How do they fare?”

“Poorly, in most cases,” he was told. “They are strange and frightened creatures, Lord Clarges, with unhappy and pitiable lives. It is a very disturbing thing, improper bonding. I hope to never see another case of it in my life, impossible though that hope is.”

Hannibal rubbed his forehead briskly, taking a deep breath that shivered with unshed tears. He was shaken down to his very soul, over and over one thought circling in his head—he had no right to any part of Will, having done such unforgivable, irreversible harm to him. His father may have beaten him, but Hannibal had ruined him, had crushed any chance Will had of bonding and finding completion with someone who did deserve him.

“Can such a bonded Omega survive without their Alpha?” he asked, thinking of the future, of the decision Will had yet to make; rather, a decision that Hannibal had already made for him with this loathsome forced bonding. “When the Alpha is alive, of course. I mean by distance. Can they survive distance?”

“They live rather longer than they would otherwise,” the All-Mother said. “But yes, they deal better with separation than their normally-bonded counterparts do. It is the lack of received affection and love that makes properly-bonded Alphas and Omegas pine for their mates. One cannot pine for something one has never felt, can one?”

“Gods help me,” Hannibal breathed. His intelligent, frighteningly perceptive, beautiful mate had tried his hardest to be what Hannibal had desired in that moment years ago, living as a beta male when an Omega was reviled. Nearly seven years with his bond like an open, infected wound in the core of him, tainting every move, coloring every decision, a questioning, inescapable vise around his soul that Hannibal had put there.

“Thank you, All-Mother,” he said, defeated by how powerless he felt. “I believe I have all the answers I need.”

“Ah, but Lord Clarges, you said you saw the Marquess through his last heat?”

The question paused him on his way out and Hannibal turned, waiting.

“It is only that I hope congratulations will soon be in order,” the All-Mother said, smiling at him. “Children are a gift from the gods, and I am sure the children between the two of you will be lovely indeed.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal said, flinching from that statement, recalling how Will had taken the blame for their potential childless state on himself when it was nothing more than another ugly manifestation of the bond Hannibal had terrorized him into. “Please give Abigail the best of care until I can return for her.”

He let himself out onto the street, slow and shocked, finding himself on a battlefront where there was nothing he could heal, no life he could change.

He had done quite enough already.

*****

It was a lonely trip back to Hartford House, riding in the ducal coach with Winston curled up at his side and Jack Crawford’s men riding in formation around them. It left Will with too much time to think and too many fronts to worry on, too many threads on too many threats to untangle them all.

He tried not to dwell too much on things he had no control over, but that was never his strong suit. With each change of horses, with the miles that grew between himself and his husband, Will’s worry grew. Part of him knew this was for the best, that hastening himself back to Hartford fully aware and alert into an environment where everyone was watching for danger was the sensible thing to do when his husband could not be with him, the last warning notwithstanding.

But the greater part of him wished he could be snuggled up at Chelsea House imagining masquerades, his senses keyed to Hannibal’s return. They might have spoken when he did so, quietly over tea in Will’s room with Winston sleeping before the fire, discussing what had happened with Abigail and how best to proceed.
Dusk fell like a veil over the world, softening the landscape and turning the trees beyond the window to shadowy sentinels. Will stroked Winston's head as he gazed out at the passing countryside, noting that they made better time when he was whole and healthy than they had when he'd been hurt.

A sudden surge of grief from his bond to Hannibal was so sudden and sharp that Will gasped, shocked, hand pressing to his chest, breathless for a long, painful moment as the world went blurry at the edges.

Winston whined, nosing him, but all Will could feel was his bond, swollen like a river with too much regret, too much pain. For a wild moment he imagined that things had gone terribly wrong and Abigail had been seized, condemned, sentenced for her father's crimes.

An unsteady breath later the bond seethed with self-recrimination, horror, guilt—the same ugly, hateful emotions Will had felt in his father's keeping, as if even the air he drew was an undeserved luxury he had no right to.

Something had happened to drown Hannibal in heartbreak that held the flavor of parting, of painful separation and the certainty that he had forfeited any hope—

Any hope for their future.

Will surged up and hit the roof, shouting, "Stop! Stop the coach!"

The horses whinnied in protest as the coach drew to a halt, the officer in charge reining his horse up to the window, even as Will ordered, "We must go back."

"M'Lord?" he said, bewildered. "Your husband—"

"Send two of your men with the other coach and let Hartford know I'm returning to the Capital, to Chelsea House," Will said, trembling with nerves and anxiety, absently trying to hush Winston, who took exception to his upset.

"We're a long way, m'Lord, are you certain?" he was asked.

"Yes," Will said, strained and frightened because somehow, some way, Hannibal knew about the bond. He knew, and they were enough alike that Will was terrified he would move to fix the situation without consulting him, that Hannibal would try to find a way to set him free.

But he didn't want to be free. Not anymore. Not now.

Not ever.

"Turn the coach around," he said, and closed his eyes on a spill of tears as the coach began to bear him back towards Chelsea House. He clung to Winston, desperate to reach his husband, awash in the pain of his bond and weeping from the depths of Hannibal's regret.

Chapter 38

It was late when the coach turned onto the street towards Chelsea House with the Capital just waking up for the night all around them. The gas lamps cast their eerie, soft glow on the world, a misty haze sparkling with moisture and mystery, but Will had no eye for its beauty. He sat gazing out of the window with solemn intensity, as if the force of his stare would carry him to Hannibal's side all the faster.

It was a long ride back, a long time to think, a long time to feel his bond to Hannibal dim from piercing horror to something much worse—the settled and inescapable certainty that there was nothing more he could do. It made Will even more anxious to reach him, cursing the fact that he had left with so much unresolved between them.

The coach pulled to a stop at last and the weary footman jumped down to open the door. Winston leapt out, hastily relieving himself before Will could even exit the coach.

"Try not to wake the staff if you can avoid it," Will said, tugging his heavy coat around him as he emerged into the cold, damp air. "The night watchman will let you in around back."

"Yes, m'Lord, we'll manage," Will was told.

"Do you and your men have boarding you can seek?" Will asked, turning to the Captain, and got a nod in return. "Have them charge the cost to Chelsea House and return once you've rested. My husband will expect I'll not try to be rid of you. He is remarkably persistent at times."
He only hoped Hannibal's persistence would not keep him from seeing reason, and silently girded himself with his Gift for what was to come. He drew a deep breath, mindful of Winston tugging on his lead, and quietly focused on the bond.

It was muted, the turmoil simmering beneath a layer of exhaustion from a long day with too many unhappy turns, but it was much more faint than he'd ever felt it, even during their six-year separation. Will reached for it, wishing he could soothe Hannibal through it, but he didn't know where to start. He feared the method of their attachment would prevent such a thing and the thought was so dismaying he immediately set it aside.

Squaring his shoulders, Will strode up to the front door where the night watchman was poised to admit him. He wondered what he would say when he was finally face to face with Hannibal, what he could possibly do that would sway him from the dangerous thinking he knew was going on. Even with such a long time to consider it along the way he hadn't been able to compose a strategy other than presenting himself with honesty. He couldn't predict how Hannibal would react, couldn't predict what arguments he might use. He had to go in blind and hope for the best, relying on Hannibal's strong affection for him to bring him around.

“Please let the others in through the back,” Will murmured. “I don't wish the house staff to be disturbed.”

“Very good, my Lord.”

The door unlocked from the inside, revealing Berger's face lined in worry that immediately transformed with relief when he saw Will.

“You are a sight for sore eyes, my Lord!” the valet said, swinging the door wide to admit Will and Winston.

“You should be abed, Mr. Berger,” Will softly scolded, drawing a deep breath of relief as he stepped inside Chelsea House. The familiar scents of wood polish and lemon oil washed over him, but no scent was more welcome than the earthy fragrance of Hannibal's Alpha perfume.

“I couldn't, my Lord,” Berger said, his voice hushed. He helped Will ease his coat off and took his gloves and hat, tidying everything as he spoke, “He's in as sorry a mood as I ever did see and, believe me, I've seen him in some sorry moods, my Lord.”

“Yes, Mr. Berger, I imagine you have,” Will said, stooping to unclip Winston's lead. The dog immediately dashed off into the darkness in search of Hannibal, his nails clicking on the smooth floors. “Where is he?”

“In the library, my Lord,” Berger confirmed. “He's been scribbling away since his return. He wouldn't tell me what had happened, but I fear for him. I feel the gods must surely hear my prayers to send you back, my Lord.”

Will smiled at that and clasped his shoulder, saying, “Go on to bed, now, Mr. Berger. I'll take care of his Lordship.”

“I know you will, my Lord,” Berger said, grateful and weary. “I never worry over him too much when he's in your blessed hands. If you need anything, anything at all, please ring me. When he's in a state, I cannot sleep for love nor money.”

“Well, do try,” Will said, sending him off with a pat. “I'll see that he gets to bed and takes some rest.”

Will's footsteps were muted in the empty silence, his movements deliberate and slow as he moved through the darkness towards the library door. Winston whined, pawing at the panel as if reproaching Will for taking so long. Will ruffled his ears before he opened the door, smiling at how eagerly Winston ran within, shooting like a marksman's bullet towards the man seated before the bright fire.

Will entered with more care, slowly, uncertain of Hannibal's mood but always certain of his welcome. He was calm, deliberate, acting with the same control and concentration he felt when teasing a prize-winning trout from the water. He couldn't afford to rush this. He refused to watch everything between them snap free and go churning off into the waters of regret. He was going to change Hannibal's mind and that was all there was to it. They would get through this and they would do so together.

Hannibal didn't look up at him. If he was surprised by Will's arrival, it certainly didn't show. He merely settled his hand on Winston's head to rub his ears, a gentle motion that set Winston's tail to wagging fiercely.

_Scribbling away_ seemed an accurate description for the paperwork spread over the library's massive desk. Will moved to inspect it, turning one of the sheets towards him and asking, “What have you been so busy working on, Hannibal?”

“Our separation agreement,” Hannibal said, his voice a low, soft rumble, weighty with sorrow. He was actively pushing down on his emotions now that he knew about the bond, Will realized, dampening his feelings to keep Will from being affected by them.
“A separation agreement,” Will echoed, skimming some of the pages in the gloom and seeing enough, quite enough indeed. He swept the papers together, forming a neat little stack that he busied himself arranging. “May I ask what prompted this sudden desire to sever yourself from me?”

“Please, don’t say it like that,” Hannibal said, his words cracking on pain, on an indrawn breath as if Will had wounded him with only a question.

“Like what?” Will asked, flattening his hand on the paper, the texture smooth and cold beneath his palm, the words beneath tiny black bars on a cage that sought to trap them both in something neither of them wanted.

“Like it is something painful,” Hannibal whispered, sitting up to brace his elbows on his knees, his profile stark and stern.

“Severed, as if blood and tears follow.”

“I feel as though they would,” Will murmured, getting the tiniest twinge from his bond, a flare of upset quickly suppressed.

“A piece of us both would be cut away by this, Hannibal. Is this truly what you want?”

Winston yipped, worried by the slow rise in tension, his anxious dark eyes moving between the two most beloved people in his life.

“Am I to have no say in this?” Will pressed, shoulders squared. He turned to pin Hannibal with his vivid blue eyes, the firelight picking out cerulean gleams from their indigo depths. “Isn’t it always mine to choose?”

“Little did I know when I promised such was that I had taken all choice from you,” Hannibal said. Tears sparkled in his eyes and thickened his voice, helpless evidence of how much this was costing him.

“Who said that you ever did?” Will asked, his voice sharp with concern. He stayed there at the desk, one hand on the papers, his blue eyes narrowed with growing affront.

Hannibal turned, a shadow against the firelight, a shape divorced of the visual cues Will relied on, his bond a mere fraction of connection.

“I made a place for Abigail at a Cenobium,” Hannibal said in a husky purr, the timber of it soft and luxurious as silk even now. “I was concerned that we had not formed a bond during your heat and I sought counsel from the All-Mother Superior.”

“You sought counsel regarding a bond from an unbonded Omega?” Will inquired, mouth thinning with displeasure to be told that Hannibal had marked the absence of their bond. And in true Alpha form he’d said nothing, seeking to be educated rather than alarm Will. “And what other pearls of wisdom did they impart?”

“They told me of the reasons why an Alpha could not bond with an Omega, and spoke of circumstances so bitterly close to your own that I had no doubt in my mind why we could not,” Hannibal said, his voice growing harsher with every word, every breath. “A lifetime of violence at the hands of your father before finding yourself wed to me and ground beneath my boot heel like some insignificant insect created the perfect conditions for a regrettable connection. An improper bond, they said. A thing bred of violence and ending in pain, binding an Omega to an Alpha they neither love nor need, but only fear.”

Will’s chin tipped up, his shoulders tight but straight, his back stiff as tempered steel as he bore the force of Hannibal’s self-loathing.

“You had but one chance in your life to have something good,” Hannibal said, stricken, horrified, “and I stole it from you by forcing you into a bond when you were little better than a child. And there is no hope of returning it. There is no hope of breaking it. I have taken your future from you as fully and surely as your father has taken your past, Will. That is what they told me.”

Light caught on a tear as it welled from his eye, painting a streak of firelight over the high curve of his cheek.

“A bond to check a violent Alpha,” he whispered, his voice distant as he reflected on it in all of its ugly meaning. “A bond to save yourself with no hope of reciprocation and no hope of escape. So yes, Will, I drew up a separation agreement. It is the least of what I should give you.”

He turned to look at Will, the words pushed out of him with force, as if he could no more bear to say them than Will could bear to hear them.

“You have been forced to marry me, forced to bond with me, forced to bend yourself to my desires. I will not force you to live with me for the rest of your life. I owe you better than that.”
“You certainly owe me better than to part me from you,” Will said, tapping the papers. “I refuse to sign a single one of these. I adamantly reject what this person has told you, Hannibal. I do not fault their logic, only their understanding of something they have no experience of. I will not agree to any separation, no matter the terms.”

“For all I know, you have no choice but to say such a thing,” Hannibal said, blowing out a breath ripe with frustration and hurt. He dropped his head into his hands, ignoring Winston’s anxious nudges. “There is no way to know how deeply this affects you, how much of it is your own decision and how much is mine. Whether you choose for yourself or to please me—”

“Hannibal, you are in grave danger of saying something we both will regret,” Will warned him, picking up the stack of papers and moving to settle across from him, somber and serious. “Please do not think that you’ve tested even the surface of my violence, Lord Clarges. If you dare imply that I am not in control of my own actions, I will show you precisely just what I am capable of when I’m properly riled. Trust me, there is far too much at hand for you to risk my wrath.”

Hannibal was startled into looking up at him, shocked but silent.

“This is just what I was afraid would happen when I realized you knew about my bond. I had to have the coach turned around midway back to Hartford and make myself seem a fickle fool to our staff,” Will said, holding his gaze, “because I had no intentions of telling them that the Lord they serve is an impulsive, determined man prone to making rash decisions.”

He tipped the papers in his hand in silent accusation.

“Do you know why I came back?” he asked, lowering the papers, his eyes tracing the contours of Hannibal’s face. He was always beautiful to Will, but seemed even more so in this moment, the gleam of his cheekbone severe in the firelight, the firmness of his chin softened by shadows.

“Because of the bond?” Hannibal asked, hoarse and harsh. “Because I as good as dragged you straight back to me like some monster from a fairy tale?”

“No,” Will said, loosing a mild sigh. “I came because I could feel how it hurt you, Hannibal. When you realized what had happened, all of your horror and self-loathing, all of your deep regret, I could feel it as if it was my own, because that is what my bond to you does. It informs me, Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s full mouth pressed into a strained line and he looked away, towards the fire, towards his thoughts, hiding in the shadow of his guilt and refusing to look past it. It was a familiar friend to him, Will knew. It was as comfortable and familiar a feeling to Hannibal as loneliness was to himself.

“I came because I belong with you,” Will quietly said, seeing Hannibal’s shoulders tense. He watched the minute play of expressions on Hannibal’s closed and distant face. “My place is with you and our home is one another.”

Hannibal flinched, recalling the words he’d spoken and how deeply he meant them, every syllable infused with his very soul.

“I know you meant it when you said that to me,” Will murmured, turning his own gaze to the fire, his words measured and soft. “I could feel it.”

“Through the bond?” Hannibal questioned, almost unable to get the words past the thickness in his throat. He lifted his head to face Will, his heavy amber gaze fixing on his beautiful, beloved mate. “The bond I forced on you? The bond you formed from sheer fright that I would hurt you? The bond I terrorized you into?”

“Yes,” Will said, unable to deny it, unwilling to minimize it and knowing that Hannibal wouldn’t allow him to. He could only turn to hold Hannibal’s wounded gaze and tell him, “Yes, that bond, Hannibal. The one I formed on the lane to Hartford Town almost seven years ago because I thought you were going to hurt me, because I was young and frightened and had heard you say you would arrange an accident to get rid of me, because I didn’t know you then. Not like I do now.”

Hannibal stared at him, stricken.

“How can you bear to even look at me?” he asked, the whisper harsh and horrified, so filled with shame that Will blinked against tears. His hand rose, pressing to his chest where Hannibal’s bond lay like a brand against his soul.

“Because it would break my heart not to,” Will whispered, swallowing hard and wetting his lips. “Because you have tried with everything in you to bring our shattered potential back together, just as you promised. Because when I was at my most vulnerable, you knelt before me and you said I was your reason for being and I always would be, Hannibal.”

Hannibal was still, stiff and immovable as stone, a perfect statue with red-rimmed eyes and a face to make gods weep with envy of their creation.
“Because there is a heart inside of you that beats just for me,” Will said, trembling but determined. Of all the things that had passed between them, this time it was his turn, his chance to reach out, his chance to make assurances. “Because for the first time in my life, I am someone’s treasure.”

Tears slipped from Hannibal’s wide eyes, rivulets sweeping like a lover’s fingers down his skin to cling to his jaw.

“I am your treasure, Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s mouth parted on an unsteady breath and he looked away, as if Will was something too precious to look upon, as if he didn’t deserve to look upon him.

“You are,” he said, his eyes flicking back to the papers in Will’s lap. “You are my treasure, Will. You always will be.”

Will could feel the pressure looming behind those words, the certainty banking like the storm over Marsham in the height of his heat.

“And because I care so much for you, I will find a way to free you from what I’ve done,” Hannibal said, a shudder of pure self-loathing running through him. “You’re right, of course. I have said it is always yours to choose, Will. I will find a way to make certain that the choice you make is truly yours, and not something born of this blasphemy I’ve forced on you.”

“Is that truly what you think it is?” Will asked, a soft, patient smile curving his lips. Hannibal was determined to fight it, resisting the lure Will offered, bending his strength to bury himself in regret because to forgive himself was unthinkable.

But Will was a good fisherman. He had patience and, more, he had an unquenchable fire within him that this man had lit, as limitless and brilliant as the sun itself.

“Am I wrong to think so?” Hannibal whispered, his hands clenching, one on his knee, the other at Winston’s ruff. There was frustration and anger in his voice, but not for Will. Never for Will. Only for himself and the terrible things he had done.

Will ached to wipe his tears away, to smooth his cheeks and hold him fast, to soothe him not as an Omega would an Alpha, but as a man would his husband, as equals in caring and affection.

“I have spent hours trying to imagine what it must be like for you to have such a bond,” Hannibal said, his long throat working on a swallow. “Forced to cater to my whims, connected to me by something you have no say in or power to break. I cannot even begin to grasp the least part of it. I think of you being held in such a state, pinned like a butterfly on display and stripped of your choices—”

He cut off, unable to finish, unable to force the words past his lips.

“I can tell you what it’s like,” Will softly offered, smoothing the papers in his lap to keep his hands busy. “It isn’t all that difficult, Hannibal. Just imagine that there is a cliff. It is a very tall cliff, pitched above the ocean, and you stand alone atop it.”

Hannibal’s eyes slid to his face, his mind conjuring the towering, sharp edges of the wild northern cliffs, black and bleak and starkly beautiful. He saw Will there, wind-buffeted with pink in his cheeks, a wild thing half human and half magic and so beautiful it could steal one’s breath away.

“Now imagine that whenever you feel sad or frightened or lonely, something inside of you urges you towards the edge of that cliff,” Will said, his voice a soft, calm purr. “The closer you get, the more frightened you are because you know all that waits is a long drop and a painful, bloody end on sharp rocks, but the more frightened you are, the more you feel compelled to run towards it, because everything inside of you promises that in doing so you will find relief from your fears, from your loneliness, from your sadness.”

Hannibal flinched, his gut clenching with anxiety inspired by those words, the image of Will atop the cliff filling him with terrible, sickening dread and horror.

“So you keep moving towards it, even though you know very well what happens in the end,” Will said, the bond suddenly more tangible, as if he had somehow broken down Hannibal’s tight control of his emotions at last. “For nearly seven years I lived in quiet terror that you would somehow discover it. That you would manipulate me through it. I thought that Nature, in Her arrogant ignorance, had burdened me with suicide of autonomy, that this unbreakable bond I have would urge me to fling myself from that clifftop and lose myself forever to the mindless obedience you once accused me of.”

Hannibal looked away again, unable to bear the image of it, his teeth clenching and his curled fist pressed to his mouth.

“It made me view myself through your eyes ever since that day and for six long years I saw nothing,” Will’s face tightened with pain, the echoing remains of the past a restless shadow on his heart. “I would look into a mirror and see the room behind me, but not myself, only an empty space where a proper person should be.”
Hannibal flinched, scalded by it, a muffled sob escaping against his knuckles. How painfully wrong it was to take all the witty humor and wide-eyed bravery, all the heart and selfless grace of him, all the potential and hope and simple needs of a fragile human and distill it into nothing.

“I was so frightened when you first returned,” Will admitted with a quiet, rueful smile, his vivid blue eyes melancholy and soft. “But then you saw me, Hannibal. After all that time, you finally saw me.”

Hannibal shuddered, dropping his head, appalled at the abhorrent cage he’d built around his husband, imprisoning him to wants and desires that were not his own, even now defending a man who had done nothing but harm him.

“You called me brilliant,” Will said, and uttered a soft laugh, tears spilling over that he paid no mind to, happiness shining in his smile. “You took me fishing and kissed me like I was something so rare and perfect... you made me believe it was true.”

“It is true,” Hannibal said, drawing a breath that ached in his chest. “Every word of it is true.”

“I know it is,” Will said, feeling a trickle of pain through his bond, Hannibal’s control loosening just a fraction more. “I know you spoke the truth because that is what my bond to you does, Hannibal. Your pleasure, your happiness, your concerns—I feel them in all their strength. That is what it does. That is all it does.”

It took a long, painful moment for Hannibal to lift his face, for him to meet Will’s eyes, a small spark of hope lighting a golden gleam within.

“It took me some time in quiet reflection, which I had plenty of on my mad dash back to keep you from doing something precisely this impulsive,” Will said, dropping a meaningful look at the papers in his lap, “but I came to the conclusion that there has never been a moment where the bond I’ve formed to you has swayed me to take actions or make decisions against my own desires. The cliff I was so frightened of was nothing more than my own reservations and uncertainties; reservations and uncertainties that you daily lay to rest with your devoted affections.”

Hannibal wet his lower lip, wiping at his face again, his other hand moving in Winston’s ruff, seeking comfort. Will countered his upset with calm, allowing the anxiety and horror and pain in Hannibal’s bond to wash through him, trying to draw it to him like venom from a wound and cast it out of them both. He did it with deliberate purpose, testing his ability to use the bond to their mutual advantage and soothe his husband so that they could solve this. It was no small triumph for him to see Hannibal’s shoulders loosen, to watch the tightness of his features ease, to know that so much more was possible than either of them had allowed for.

“Consider this, Hannibal,” Will murmured, his tears drying on his cheeks, salt sparkling on his skin like a glimmer of star dust. “When Winston ran and I chased him, did you not wish with everything in you that I would stop? That I would heed you?”

Hannibal frowned, struggling against Will’s calm, soft reason.

“When I fled to the Hobbs house with you shouting after me, do you think you wouldn’t have stopped me in my tracks if the bond works as you believe? Even without you knowing about it?” Will offered, watching the realization sinking in. “Were you able to control me in the slightest way through my bond to you, Hannibal, I highly doubt you would’ve been slapped in the face with a fish or threatened with a marquetry table.”

It brought a sad, rueful smile to Hannibal’s lips, reluctant and soft. He finally was able to meet Will’s eyes, the effort Herculean.

“Why did you withdraw from me?” Hannibal whispered, his grip on his emotions slipping even more, anguish atop of horror and blanketed in firm determination to make things right. Will took it all, willing to wade through the darkness to find the light he knew awaited him. “This was what you wanted to tell me, wasn’t it? What you feared to speak of?”

Will nodded, fingers absently brushing over the papers, fiddling with a folded corner as he thought.

“Yes, it was. And I pulled away from you for the same reasons you drew up these horrid papers, Hannibal,” he admitted. “Because I, like you, am prone to making rash decisions and attempting to fix things on my own. We are two stubborn creatures on that count, Lord Clarges.”

His large, expressive eyes held Hannibal’s, a world of understanding and vast affection in every flickering glimmer.

“I did it because I worried that you might suffer from my lack,” he said, with too much to lose to cater to shyness, too much at stake to turn away now. “I did it because I realized then that I care for you too much to trap you where you cannot be whole.”
Hannibal jerked as if slapped, his head snapping back towards the fire, grief rising between them that was not all his own, not entirely.

“But I find I am greedy,” Will whispered, willing Hannibal to look at him, rewarded with the slow turn of his head and the piercing intensity of his gaze. “I am selfish, every bit as selfish as an Alpha, Hannibal. I asked myself if I was willing to sacrifice your future happiness for my own and when I felt you discover the bond, I had my answer.”

Hannibal held his breath, his heart pounding so hard in his chest it nearly deafened him, every fiber in his being attuned to the words his husband spoke.

“I am willing, Hannibal,” Will said, gentle self-reproach in the curve of his sad smile. “When faced with the idea of being parted from you, I am more selfish than any Alpha who has ever lived.”

“Will...” Hannibal whispered, the painful yearning of his heart distilled down into a single name that drew the boundaries of his joy. Will, a match so entirely suited to him that no other could ever compare.

“It’s mine to choose, Hannibal,” Will said, every line of his body soft with ease, welcoming, accepting, no influence of his one-sided bond but simply him, simply his loving, beautiful heart. “I chose to give us a chance to be a family. I chose to unlock that door and share my heat with you. I chose to come to you in this moment. Just as I choose to sit here for as long as it takes to make you understand that I will not allow what has happened in the past to return and wound me yet again. I refuse to give it that power, Hannibal. I simply won’t stand for it.”

A long silence fell broken only by the soft snap and pop of the logs burning down in the fireplace.

“How am I to live with knowing what I’ve done to you?” Hannibal finally asked, a heartbroken whisper that bordered on a plea. “That when you make your decision and find someone deserving of you, you will never be able to bond with them because of my actions?”

“The same way I will live with knowing that I may never bear children because of the choices I made—and they were my choices, Hannibal,” Will said, cutting him off before he could speak. “I’m not excusing what happened. I’m not even sure if I’m forgiving it; I wouldn’t know how to start. But I cannot change what happened and I have accepted it, Hannibal. It’s a part of me now, for better or worse.”

Hannibal stared at him, a world of questions in his amber eyes, his strong hands trembling, all of his Alpha strength shaken to its foundations by a lone Omega with limpid blue eyes and a depth of understanding he never expected and never deserved.

“It told you before that there are things which cannot be mended, Hannibal. There is no moving backwards and time does not reverse,” Will reminded him. “Teacups remain shattered, words remain spoken, and everyone lives with the consequences as they must. We will live with these consequences because we are both made of stronger stuff than a teacup.”

Hannibal gazed at him with such deep devotion that Will’s eyes misted all over again, a tremor running through his slender frame, their future hanging in the balance, trembling on a knife’s edge just waiting to be cut in two.

“Do you still see yourself through my eyes, Will?” Hannibal asked, the words barely heard over the crackle of the fire. “Yes,” Will whispered, drawing a deep breath. “I do, Hannibal. I see myself as you see me—every bit of me the treasure that you hoard.”

He stood, papers in hand, and moved to the fire. Crouching, he picked up the first sheet and fed it to the flames, murmuring, “I see myself in your delight when you look at me.”

He picked up the next, a decree settling an obscenely generous annuity on Will for the remainder of his life. “I see myself in the way you grin when you find me clever,” he whispered, and sent it floating into the licking fire. “When I feel at my most ugly and vulnerable, I see myself transformed as you whisper with awe that I am beautiful.”

He plucked up another sheet, the flames flaring brighter as it consumed the heavy paper. “I see myself as someone who inspires you to be someone I never dreamed could exist, solely for my sake,” Will said, committing another wall between them to ash. “I am known and cherished from the tips of my curls to the curl of my toes, Hannibal. Something even my imagination never dared hope for.”

Another page, and another, line after line parceling Hannibal’s worldly goods out for the happiness he hoped to give Will in place of himself.
“I see myself as I see you, Hannibal,” he said, looking over at him, the sheer longing in Hannibal’s eyes nearly undoing him. “Tormented by a past we have no way to change, but determined to suffer in silence, determined to spare those we hold most dear.”

“Will…”

“We are finite in flesh but limitless in spirit, wounded but rising above it,” Will told him, delivering another piece of paper to its fiery death. “We are stubborn and proud and flawed, but we are trying, Hannibal. We may not have gotten it right the first time, but there’s no reason for us to ever stop trying.”

He calmly gave the last paper to the fire, Hannibal’s letter to Grandfather requesting his permission to dissolve their union on the grounds of irreparable personal and emotional harm done, stating that Hannibal was unfit to continue as Will’s husband.

“We are just alike, you and I,” Will murmured, watching the fire eat it all away, wishing he could so easily erase the barriers that parted them. “When there is some issue where we are at fault, we move to minimize the damage to those we care most for. It is all too easy for us to forget that those we seek to protect may be harmed to a greater degree by our decision not to involve them.”

He turned and fixed his blue eyes on Hannibal and said, “I chose not to speak of the bond, first from fear, and then from hope. Hope that in the depths of my heat what we felt for one another would somehow overcome it. When it did not, I held my silence out of my desire to spare you, Hannibal, just as you desired to spare me. But I do not wish to be spared, and it occurred to me that you might not wish to be spared, either.”

He rose, a solid shadow framed by firelight as he moved to take Hannibal’s hand in his. The touch was gentle, as reverent of him as Hannibal had ever been of Will himself.

“I am rich in treasure with you,” Will said, whispering back to him those words he’d spoken in the warmth of their bed, when they’d been tied together by so much more than just a knot of flesh. “Should every fortune I have reverse, I could withstand the pain of it if only I have you near me.”

Hannibal’s fingers clenched on his, a tremor of reaction, a reflexive response that preceded the rise of tears in his amber eyes. His large frame shuddered with the force of his emotions as he brought Will’s hand to his lips, holding it fast in both of his own to lay warm kisses on his knuckles, to press it to his face where tears rolled hot against Will’s skin.

“I need no bond to complete me,” Will whispered, stroking his hair, the soft strands feathery and fine against his gentle fingertips. “By my own completion, I know you, Hannibal Lecter.”

Those amber eyes swept up to his, glistening and full as Will said, “And with you I am complete.”

Hannibal rose from the chair in a whirlwind of scent and heat and desperate, aching pain, sweeping Will half off of his feet with the strength of his affection.

“Promise me you will never forgive me,” he begged, squeezing Will to him with the frantic urgency of a man certain he will lose everything he holds dear. “Swear to me, Will, that you will never allow me to forget what I have done to you.”

“I would never make such a promise,” Will told him, kneading his nape, his own strong arms just as forceful. His relief left him shaken, trembling with released tension. He had counted on the strength of Hannibal’s feelings for him and he had not been disappointed. It was not the last of it, but it was the worst of it, and they clung together all the stronger for so nearly being torn apart.

“Not when I know that you will never forgive yourself, Hannibal,” Will said, the emptiness that had overcome him on his way back now filled with his mate, as it should be. “There is no punishment or retribution I could dream of that would rival what you inflict on yourself for my sake, and I have no interest in your suffering. Only in your happiness.”

He eased back just enough to bring his hand to rest on Hannibal’s cheek, the shadow on his heart chased away by the caring and devotion so evident in his husband’s expression.

“Life is never fair, and rarely what we have earned, but I would much rather promise you that I will forgive you than be sworn to a promise I know I cannot keep,” he whispered, smoothing Hannibal’s tears away at long last. He tipped his head and kissed the corner of Hannibal’s eye, the delicate skin soft beneath his lips, another warm tear tracing the seam of his mouth. He kissed it away, the salty flavor lost to the sweetness of its meaning. He kissed his closed lids and the high slopes of his cheeks, over and again, until Hannibal stilled in his arms, warm and solid and calmed by his soft ministrations.
“The mirror is no longer empty, Hannibal. I see myself through your eyes and find that there is someone beautiful and irreplaceable looking back at me,” Will whispered, kissing his forehead and the tip of his nose, kissing the corners of his mouth and finally resting against him, nuzzling him, needing to touch him. “Don’t thrust me back into the bleakness that I knew before your return. Keep your word and help me bring our shattered potential back together again.”

“If it takes the rest of my life, I will never stop trying,” Hannibal breathed, leaning his forehead against Will’s, his hands smoothing Will’s back, his grip no less strong, but gentle and loving. “It is always yours to choose, Will.”

The bond swelled inside of him like a second heartbeat pounding in time with Will’s own, each reverberation stronger than the one before it. It was the sweet sound of a waltz all their own, the music of a love uniquely theirs, the harmony tuned for their ears alone.

Will’s lids lowered, his blue eyes nearly black beneath the sweep of his lashes. He drew the strength of Hannibal’s affection around him like a shield, wrapping himself in it, plunging himself deep without reserve. The kiss he pressed to Hannibal’s lips tasted of victory, of a battle fought hard and won, and he claimed his prize with a soft, coaxing purr half smothered against Hannibal’s firm lips. Hannibal answered it with a rumbling chuff, the Alpha in him rising to heed the call of the Omega he belonged to.

“I want you, Hannibal,” Will breathed, cupping his face to kiss him breathless, needing to return the strength of his feelings in full, to show him that though all was not forgiven nor forgotten, it was not enough to stand in the way of what they shared. “In all your tenderness and strength and earnest efforts, I want you.”

Show me that you want me, too...

Hannibal felt it, sensed it; he needed no bond to tell him, no mystical connection to grant him insight into Will’s heart. Others loved fully without it, and he would see to it that Will never suffered the lack, that he was loved so thoroughly and so deeply that he had no time to wonder what might have been had they come together as Nature intended and not as the evils of man had determined.

They would feed their little flame until it swelled to a raging inferno, fusing them together in a way a bond never could. What hope had something so routine when faced with what they had weathered? What could it possibly offer when what they shared had been tempered and beaten and folded together as armor for a war? They had one another, flawed but trying, overcoming their hurdles time and again and refusing—always refusing—to be spared.

When it came to loving and being loved, it would always be worth the cost.

“I am yours,” Hannibal whispered, returning Will’s kisses with growing heat, half afraid to touch him, certain that he would vanish like smoke, removed far beyond his reach for the long, lonely length of his life. “Gods alone know why you would want me, but I am wholly and entirely yours, Will...”

He opened his eyes, turning his face against Will’s hand to nuzzle his wrist, scenting the delicate webbing of blue veins beneath the tender surface of his skin.

“I am yours to choose,” he breathed, kissing the soft throb of his pulse, turning to press another light, sucking kiss against his other wrist, “I am yours to command, to do with as you please.”

He nuzzled his nose against Will’s, cradling him close, relishing the pressure of Will’s warm, firm hands against his cheeks.

“I would kneel at your feet every day of our lives and give thanks to the gods to be blessed with you,” he said, his mouth brushing Will’s with every soft movement of his lips. “The only hell I can imagine is a life without you, Will. How empty and meaningless it would be...”

He kissed Will’s full lips, a bare brushing touch of mouths, breath drawn as breath, sweet with the promise of what could be.

Of what truly was.

“Anything you could ever ask of me, I would do for only the pleasure of your smile,” Hannibal whispered, lids fluttering when the tip of Will’s tongue traced the plump curve of his lower lip. “Cut me, and I bleed the blue of your eyes by moonlight. Look into the fabric of my soul and you will find your name branded there. Listen to my heart and you will hear its rhythm beat your name.”

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, kissing him once, and again, hands sweeping down his shoulders to grasp the firm muscle of his arms, his heart singing in his chest.
“I am yours,” Hannibal said again, fiercely, insistently. “I swear by all the gods, Will, I am yours and yours alone; if not forever, then for as long as you will have me.”

Will twined his arms around Hannibal and he gave him a gentle tug, sinking to the floor together before the fire, mouths meshed and bodies trembling. Winston whined and retreated to the library door, unmarked by either of them. There was no room to spare attention when every touch was a miracle revered for its welcome.

Will didn’t feel the soft weave of the handmade carpet beneath him, nor the ache of bruises still tender from the passion of his heat. All he felt was the warmth of Hannibal against him, the soft rush of his heated breath, the gentle urgency of the hands that touched him as they sat in a jumble of long legs and taut clothing.

He found Hannibal’s neckerchief and tugged it, unnotting it to drag it free. There was no hesitation in the way he pushed his nose beneath Hannibal’s jaw, filling his lungs with his mate’s thick Alpha scent, one hand curling around Hannibal’s nape to hold him fast.

Hannibal chuffed softly, approval heavy in the deep rumble of it even as he stripped Will’s neckerchief off, in turn. Heaven was the scent that reached him, hot and sweet and ripe with fertility that had not faded since Will’s heat. He tipped his head, baring more of his throat for Will’s gentle scenting, filling every sense with the perfection of his mate.

The urgency of heat and rut had satiated their bodies, but this slow and languid scenting fed much deeper hungers than even that. There was a flavor to each of the other, a subtle blend of their scents that was intoxicating. They tasted it in slow, lingering kisses, pulled it over teeth and tongue to feel it burst into greedy lungs. It was the scent of Alpha and Omega made one, the perfume of family and the fragrance of home that had nearly been lost to them both.

Will tipped his chin up and turned, offering the other side of his long throat where the mark lay. Hannibal’s lips brushed over it, gentle against his healing skin, but the rub of his sharp Alpha fangs was unmistakable and Will shuddered, whispering soft encouragement.

He had a brief, fleeting thought about locking the door, or moving to either of their rooms where very comfortable beds were ready to hold them, but Hannibal’s long fingers swept beneath the heavy material of his jacket to pluck the buttons of his waistcoat and Will promptly abandoned any such notion. The last thing on earth he wanted in this moment was to pull away from Hannibal’s seeking touch, from the gentle hunger in the kisses being rained on his neck.

The waistcoat gaped with the final button and Hannibal leaned back only enough to strip both jacket and waistcoat from him, his amber eyes fastened on Will’s. The moment his arms were free, Will cupped his face, tipping forward to kiss him again, the slow stroke of tongue against tongue building a warmth inside him that his heat couldn’t hold a candle to. Each slide of lips was an homage, each light press of sharp teeth a prayer, each gentle suck silent adoration that was returned with fervor.

“Will,” Hannibal whispered, cupping the corded thigh that had somehow worked over his hip, the shift and tug of their bodies bringing them as close as sitting would allow. He traced the muscle beneath the fine material of Will’s pants, feeling it shift and tighten as his hand slid up to rest at Will’s hip.

He breathed his name over and over, allowing Will to strip his waistcoat from him. His pocket watch slid out onto the floor, the chain and Will’s garter ribbon bright against the dark weave of the carpet. A soft purr of laughter escaped Will when he saw it but the laughter turned quickly to a low gasp when Hannibal framed his slim waist with both hands, sliding his shirt free of his pants.

“Kiss me,” Hannibal whispered, husky and urgent. He fumbled blindly to tug Will’s boot free, fighting to draw the fitted leather from his long foot.

Will’s mouth touched his in a teasing, feather light kiss, even as his long fingers rapidly undid the buttons on Hannibal’s shirt. He pressed his palms to his husband’s broad chest, curling his fingers into the thick, crisp hair dusted with silver. He ran his hands up to Hannibal’s broad shoulders, slipping the fine shirt down his arms and off. Hannibal snared it where it tucked into his pants and jerked it free, tossing it into a heap with their other clothing.

“I should carry you upstairs,” he said, breathing it against Will’s lips, seeking more of those light, teasing kisses.

“But in this state,” Will whispered back, leaning back on his hands to bend his knee up, brows lifted.

Hannibal grinned, obeying the silent request. He reached for Will’s other boot and slid it from him, flinging it away in favor of grasping Will’s heel. He shaped Will’s slender ankle with his hands, sweeping the hard muscle of his calf up to the hem of his pants.

“A gleeful and more joyous death any man has a right to,” Hannibal murmured, bending to kiss Will’s knee, his hand sliding up Will’s inner thigh to cup his leg, squeezing the firmness of his thigh just to feel the solid weight of him. "With my last sight on earth that of the world’s most perfect knees."

He tugged Will’s leg over his hip, releasing his thigh to find the fastenings of his pants. The loose tails of Will’s shirt draped down to shield him as the buttons were undone, the soft cloth of his underthings keeping him modestly covered.

He was quickly divested of both, his husband uncoiling from him to drag Will’s pants and underclothes off of him. The nap of the carpet prickled his firm backside and Will shifted, tugging the tail of his shirt beneath him.

Hannibal tossed Will’s things to land with the others and turned back, his mouth parting on a low gasp as he stared at his mate, his white stockings stark against the pearly expanse of his thighs, his plain black garter ribbons tied firmly at his knees, his half-undone shirt throwing shadows over his slender belly.

“Gods in heaven,” Hannibal said, voice raspy with desire, raw with his need to love Will with everything in him. “Your knees are no indication of how dangerous you truly are, Will.”

“Then I will strive not to wound you, Hannibal,” Will offered, bending his knee up to untie the black garter just above the shapely turn of his leg.

Hannibal stayed his hand, smoothing his fingers over the ribbon.

“Leave them,” he said, a flush warming his high cheeks at the suggestion. “Wound me, Will. There is no pain too great that I would not suffer it for your touch.”

Will blushed, but did as Hannibal desired and left his stockings in place, shivering when his husband’s sensitive hands slid over his knees in brief appreciation. The fire was warm at his back as Hannibal drew away, only long enough to shed his own clothing, leaving his pants in place just in case Will might not wish for more.

It was always his choice, and in a lifetime bereft of such a luxury, Will clung to the surety of that promise with every bit of his heart, loving Hannibal all the more for his sincerity.

Hannibal plucked the decorative brocade lap blanket up from the back of the settee and turned to kneel, easily scooping Will into his arms, his mate’s husky, surprised laughter music to his ears.

“A certain someone would never forgive me for tumbling you about on carpets,” he whispered, holding Will in his lap while he spread the blanket out before the fire, his mate’s delectable backside a firm weight against his aching groin.

“I won’t ask who,” Will whispered, kissing him so that Hannibal forgot what he was about, his hands sliding up Will’s body in awed exploration. His laughter was gruff and halfway a groan when Will purred, “For fear that we might lose our opportunity.”

“I don’t think even my meddling relatives could make a dent in my appreciation for you just now, Will,” Hannibal said, easing down onto the blanket to lay Will before him, his dark curls a spill of ink against the blanket, his slender, sturdy body a masterpiece of supple beauty wrapped in a thin blouse and clad in snowy stockings. “To think how close I’ve come to losing you, Will. So many times, for so many reasons…”

“You haven’t lost me, Hannibal,” Will whispered. “I’m here, right where I belong.”

Will smiled up at him and opened his arms in unspoken invitation. The love shining in Hannibal’s eyes brought tears to his own and he drew his husband down to him, into the strong circle of his embrace, firm against the body he found so perfect in every way, deep into the heart that had prepared this tender place for the whole of his life, waiting so anxiously for the right person to fit.

And that person was Hannibal; his flawed but earnest husband who would spend every waking moment in relentless pursuit of Will’s happiness, simply because he cared.

“What are you thinking of?” Hannibal asked, draping at his side with leonine grace, his elbow braced and his cheek resting in his hand as he gazed down at Will. He trailed his other hand over the long column of Will’s throat, finding the dip of his collarbone to caress the soft skin there.

“How glad I am that I turned the coach around,” Will answered, sighing when Hannibal’s hand curved against his throat, warm and weighty and loving. He turned his head just slightly to look up at his husband before tugging Hannibal’s hand from
his throat to his mouth. He kissed the salty skin of his palm, kissed each callused fingertip in turn, smiling when Hannibal
couldn’t resist the urge to trace Will’s kiss-wet lips as he did so. “How glad I am that I can be sensible enough for both of us and
we are here now, dangerous knees and meddlesome relatives notwithstanding.”

Hannibal chuckled, trailing his fingers down Will’s cheek to caress his jaw. He leaned over him, capturing Will’s mouth in
another brushing kiss that quickly deepened.

“How does it always end up that when I set out to rescue you,” Hannibal said, fingers sliding down Will’s throat to spread
over the bared skin of his chest, pressing where his heart pumped a gentle rhythm against his palm, “you end up rescuing me,
instead?”

“I suppose you’re just lucky,” Will suggested, a slight wriggle shifting Hannibal’s hand over just a small stretch beneath his
open shirt to lay on the gentle curve of his breast. “Both of us are.”

“Aren’t we just,” Hannibal agreed, cupping the small mound of Will’s breast in the heat of his hand, his mouth whispering
kisses over the stubborn tuck of Will’s chin, over the fullness of his lower lip, up to the tip of his adorable nose.

Will covered Hannibal’s hand with his, flattening it against the tender peak of his nipple, the material of his shirt a silky
barrier between his hand and the heat of Hannibal’s own.

“Every time I touch you is like the first time,” Hannibal purred, running his thumb over Will’s nipple until it tightened, a
hard pebble of delectable pink begging for lips and tongue to worship it. But he kissed Will’s lips instead, teasing that stiff point
with slow sweeps of his thumb, catching it in a soft pinch that made Will’s back arch, hips tilting in invitation. “Every inch of
you is a mystery I solve anew, each time rewarded in excess of the time before.”

Will caught Hannibal’s lower lip in his teeth, sucking softly, nibbling his way into a deeper kiss to feel the slick, velvety
touch of his tongue. The slow, methodical tug on his nipple shot straight to his groin, his firm flesh rising up against his belly,
straining for a touch. The whisper of cloth over his sensitive skin was a tease of sensation, too light to do anything more than
stoke the fire.

Hannibal gave Will one final tug and kissed his way down his throat, moving to undo the remaining buttons on Will’s
shirt. The ruddy darkness of his large nipples tenting the material of his fine shirt was too much temptation and Hannibal
darted his tongue out to coil around one swollen point.

He suckled Will through the fabric, exposing more and more of his slender body as the buttons were undone. Will bit his
lip, his half-lidded eyes fastened on the sight of Hannibal paying rapturous attention to his flesh. The draw of his mouth was
almost painful in the pleasure it brought him, each rub of Hannibal’s tongue coaxing him to exquisite hardness. Hannibal bit
him ever so softly, raking the material of the shirt away with his sharp teeth to bare his wet skin to the cool air.

The sudden chill was countered by the hot, wet mouth closing over him and Will moaned, liquid with pleasure, kneading
Hannibal’s nape to urge him on. His breath came out in a stuttering gasp when the last button was undone and Hannibal’s
fingers lightly skimmed over the fluttering planes of his belly.

“You’re always so careful with me,” he breathed, tugging Hannibal’s hair to raise his head for another kiss, blanketing
himself in Alpha strength and weight. He twined his arms around Hannibal’s back, smoothing his skin and caressing him,
tracing the rough places where his nails had scored deep, testament to the passion Hannibal could wake in him. “I fear I am
not so careful with you.”

“Any pain is worth it,” Hannibal reminded him, eyes closing when Will swept his hands over his sides, fingers slipping
beneath the loosened waist of his pants. He hissed in surprise when Will set his nails in his backside, firmly cupping him, and
grinned as his amber eyes slit open.

Will stroked the sting away, opening for his husband’s hungry kisses. He gave Hannibal’s backside another lusty squeeze
and rubbed his hands up the small of his back. His husband was silky and warm against him, settling against Will with a
throtty Alpha purr rumbling through his wide chest. Will curled his fingers in the ditch of Hannibal’s spine, a soft moan
escaping him to vividly recall the powerful flex and shift of his husband’s body surging into him.

Hannibal swallowed his moan, laving Will’s mouth with his tongue, shuddering as Will’s fingers fought the fastenings on
his pants with sudden urgency. He shifted, trying to make room without losing Will’s sweet mouth in the process. A too-hasty
tug ripped fastenings free, button skipping over the carpet to be wondered over later by the staff.
But for now, Hannibal didn’t care. The moment there was room enough, Will drew the fastenings on his underthings and shoved it all down over his lean hips.

There was a keenly Omegan pleasure in seeing Hannibal rear back to shove the offending cloth off, in watching the beautiful, supple strength of his tawny body as he moved. Will lay back, panting and surprised by the strength of his own desires as Hannibal came to him by firelight, a dangerous beast with heavy fangs and a hungry mouth eager to devour him.

Hannibal knelt between Will’s feet, staring down at him for a long, absorbed moment. Will was flushed and tousled, his shirt spread beneath him and clinging to his shapely biceps. His pert little breasts heaved with every breath, their large tips tight and straining. The way that his slim waist dipped into the slight curve of his hips, framing the hard length of his sex, was nearly enough to unman him entirely.

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, sliding his legs against Hannibal’s hips, the silky stockings brushing against him waking a responsive pulse in his heavy sex.

Will cocked his head, a slight smile curving his lips when Hannibal seized him by his calf and kissed his knee, rubbing his cheek along the smooth material of his stocking and higher, laying kisses up Will’s thigh.

Will’s eyes fluttered nearly closed and his breath left him on a deep, delighted sigh as Hannibal pushed his legs wider, his hot breath streaming over Will’s skin. The spill of it against his tight sac and small slit made him shudder, his hands clenching into fists. Hannibal coiled between his legs and kissed him there on those small, full lips swollen with desire and veiling the tight heat of him.

His husband was not to be denied. Gently, with cautious care for the toll Will’s heat had taken on him, Hannibal teased his way inside Will’s body, his lapping tongue a small warning of what would surely follow. He suckled and plumbed the heat of Will’s body with no thought beyond bringing him pleasure, laving his small, high sac with kisses as he feasted on the sweet, meaty flavor of his mate’s tight body.

Will stretched beneath his touch, luxuriating in it, hardly aware when his own heaving breath became soft, raspy cries. He wanted to close his eyes and savor it, but he was greedy for the sight of Hannibal working his way higher, greedy for the flash of amber eyes that caught and held his as Hannibal dragged his tongue up the quivering stretch of Will’s eager sex, a trail of sensation that was electric in its intensity.

He rocked his hips in restless encouragement, primed and ready and needing his husband. He could see by the swollen, dripping state of him that Hannibal needed him just as badly in return, and ached to bring his husband the same pleasure he was feeling.

But Hannibal swallowed him down in one practiced, fluid motion and Will cried out, all rational thought lost to the exquisite delight of being engulfed in tight, wet heat. Hannibal’s strong hands cupped his backside, lifting him and controlling his wriggling with difficulty as he caught a rhythm, drawing up and plunging down at a pace Will could not resist.

He arched up hard, spots dancing before his wide eyes as he pulled taut in a breathless arc of pleasure. It snapped like a string wound too tightly, every nerve in his body firing with the force of his release. He sobbed, thrusting against Hannibal’s sucking mouth until he had nothing left to give. He slumped back on the blanket, trembling and spent, belatedly loosening the clench of his thighs around his husband’s head.

Hannibal was reluctant to stop. He kept suckling until Will was soft and wriggled in protest before finally letting him slide free.

Will was warm and yielding as Hannibal slid over him, folding around him, tucking up tightly to his body. He felt small and delicate beneath him, a coveted, protected treasure meant to be kissed with tenderness and delight. He cradled his husband in turn, thighs falling open at the first wet kiss of Hannibal’s swollen head against his slit.

Hannibal arched over him, grazing kisses down Will’s sternum, golden eyes closed in delight as he eased deeper. Will stroked his hair, his nape, gliding his hands over Hannibal’s shoulders as that thick, engorged flesh spread him open. The taut expectation of discomfort gave way and he softened around Hannibal’s gentle pushes, wet and willing and responsive to every teasing press and retreat.

“Hannibal,” Will moaned, tugging at him, his stocking-clad legs lifting to Hannibal’s hips, strong thighs and equally dangerous calves gripping him from haunches to thigh to pull him closer.

Hannibal resisted the pull, working himself deeper in a slow, steady rhythm that made Will’s toes curl against him.
“I thought I would never be able to touch you this way again,” Hannibal whispered, finally settling against him. He swept one arm up beneath Will's shoulders and arched over him, mouths meeting in a deep and aching kiss. “I thought I had lost you forever...”

“I'm here,” Will said, half a moan in his husband's mouth. He coiled his arms around Hannibal's neck to hold him close, close enough that there was no space between them, welcoming the pleasant weight that settled against him. He rocked his hips up, his wet sex pressed against the firm softness of Hannibal's furry belly, his nipples teased by the hair on his chest. “I'm right where I belong.”

It brought Hannibal to sudden motion against him, but even in this he was careful, considerate of the toll Will's heat had taken on them both. It was gentle and slow but deep, each rolling pulse of his hips sliding his fat sex within Will's eager body to reach all the sensitive places that needed his touch. It was a different pleasure than having Hannibal's mouth on him, a deeper kind of sensation that made him shudder with looming orgasm, and with every rub of their bodies together Will knew he would have both in short order.

It was slow and deliberate, each moment hoarded for the pleasure it brought. They moved as one, bodies rippling together, unhurried in their enjoyment of one another. Pleasure built between them in breathless whispers until their kisses grew more frantic, less lingering and more demanding. Hannibal's raspy, husky moans matched Will's softer cries, echoing in the quiet room. Hannibal's knot began to fill, a plump ring that caught in Will's slit with each short thrust in a burst of sensation from the little nerve bundles eager to embrace it.

“Hannibal,” he said, moaning his name over and over again, tangling his fingers in his husband's fine hair, risking his soft lips to those sharp teeth but not caring if he bled. Pleasure coiled like a spring inside of him, dangerous and vibrating with tension, needing only the barest touch to send it bursting out of control.

Hannibal groaned, squeezing Will to him, one hand falling to sweep his hip to the bend of his knee. He caught him there, hitching Will's leg up higher over his hip, opening him more fully for his growing knot.

But the stocking did him in; that silky, smooth stocking over his dangerous knee sliding against Hannibal's naked skin. His fingers spread where the garter ribbon was tied fast, touching hot skin and velvety ribbon and slippery stocking all at once and his knot filled in earnest.

“Gods, Will,” he moaned, hunkering over him to plunge deep, trying to restrain himself but unable to resist the siren call of his young mate's body. His other hand slipped beneath Will's back to clutch him close, gripping the smooth curve of his shoulder in sudden frenzy.

Panting, Will hitched his other leg up and rolled his hips, a harsh sob of pleasure escaping him when his husband sank deep, his knot swelling so full it tested the boundary between pleasure and pain.

Hannibal dropped over him, a blanket of musky Alpha scent and warm flesh and gentle kisses. His flanks tightened, seeking the tie that would bind them, and Will captured his knot with a keening moan.

He was senseless with the pleasure of it, squeezing down around Hannibal's knot to rhythmically milk it, every ripple of his body feeding shocking sensation through him. He undulated beneath his husband's weight, teeth clenching when the first flood of seed brought an answering spasm of ecstasy from his own sex, a dribble of seed pooling between the press of their bellies.

“Gods, Will, how I love you,” Hannibal breathed, naming it at long last, the gentle whisper of it almost sliding past Will's awareness, but not past the bond. He caught his breath on a surprised sob and clung tightly to Hannibal's shoulders, wondering if he had misheard him, knowing he hadn't. It woke such a profound feeling in answer that Will trembled from it, frightened and elated and entirely filled with joy.

Hannibal slid both arms beneath him to gather him up, legs tucking to form a ball of flesh pressed tightly together, locked as much in spirit as in body. He rained kisses over Will's jaw, over his throat, scenting him and nipping him, groaning with each pulse of his hips as pleasure wracked them both. It was a slow but fierce climax, like water spilling over a dam after a storm, a culmination of too much pressure finally given release.

“My heart, my treasure, my love,” Hannibal whispered, all thoughts of shielding Will from his bond temporarily lost to the beauty of this moment, his deepest emotions bared for his mate's connection to him. He cradled Will's head in his hand, the
other falling to cup the slight sway of his back, that distracting curve that balanced the ripe fullness of his backside with the perfect stretch of his shoulders. “My beautiful, wonderful beloved.”

Will blinked back tears but they rose despite it, the bond flooding him with how deeply Hannibal cared for him, with the pleasure he felt, a pleasure they shared as their bodies did what Nature had designed them to do.

The sharpness of it faded slowly, dying like the firelight as the logs burned down, but it didn’t vanish entirely. They lay twined in one another’s arms even as Hannibal’s knot slackened, his seed seeping out to wet the blanket. They couldn’t stop kissing, touching, shaken by the knowledge of how close they had come to losing it all.

“It seems I have been proven wrong in my declaration,” Will whispered, smiling against his husband’s mouth and stroking his face. “While not those of Hartford House, I am now thoroughly acquainted with one carpet, at last.”

Hannibal chuckled, the sound rumbling in his belly in a pleasant vibration against Will’s own.

“Should we revisit the Turkish monstrosity when we return?” he asked, smoothing Will’s curls and getting only a sultry smirk in response. He nuzzled Will’s nose and sighed, whispering, “I believe Winston has given up on us and decided to keep my feet warm. Perhaps we should all seek a more comfortable bed?”

“Mm, just a moment longer,” Will sighed, stretching beneath Hannibal, his toes finding Winston’s warm flank curled up as close as he dared now that they’d fallen still.

Hannibal gave Will another lingering, devouring kiss before he raised his head to look down at him again, cupping his face with such wonder that Will shivered, covering Hannibal’s hand with his own.

“I love you, Will,” he said, wanting to say it to him again without the force of their passions masking it. He wanted Will to hear it plainly, to know that he meant it, so there would be no doubt in Will’s mind on that count. “I don’t expect you to return my affections. I don’t expect you to ever forgive me. I would never have it be another shackle that binds you to me against your will... I only want you to know that I love you with everything in me.”

He drew Will’s hand to his heart and held it there, his fingers warm against Will’s own. The bond nearly sang with the force of it, a tender, bright note that parted Will’s lips on a silent gasp with its strength.

“I love you,” Hannibal said again, lifting Will’s hand to his lips to kiss it. “And I always will.”

Will swallowed hard, struggling against the thickness of tears that closed his throat and stifled his voice. But Hannibal didn’t wait for a reply. He didn’t expect one, just as he’d said. He kissed Will’s parted lips and eased out of him, the sudden loss almost too much after such closeness.

The loss didn’t last for long, however. Hannibal scooped him up in his arms, rumpled blanket and all, whistled Winston to his heels, and carried Will up to his bed, content to love his mate as he deserved and hope that one day he could be loved in return.

Chapter 39

The mood at Chelsea House was considerably lighter for Will’s return. Berger valiantly managed to collect the clothing from the library before the maids found it, though one stray button remained unaccounted for and later found its way back in the quiet, unobtrusive way of the Lecter family staff.

There was a tacit understanding between the Lords Clarges that Will would remain with Hannibal until they both could go back to Hartford House together. After everything that had happened, any talk of separation was anathema and avoided as such. They made their arrangements accordingly, finding time over breakfast to speak what had transpired in Will’s absence regarding Abigail.

“I do wish they would let us at least see her,” Will said, rapping his spoon with a fierce cock of his eyebrow when he caught Hannibal sneaking Winston another bite of smoked ham beneath the table. “Hannibal.”

“They fear our influence,” Hannibal said, grinning at the threat in his husband’s eyes. He generously added another slice of ham to Will’s plate, which won him a small smile. “But I, too, wish we could visit with her. She must be very nervous and unhappy in such a place, though the Cenobites are not unkind.”
“She is a young girl used to fresh air and freedom,” Will said, able to return to his breakfast now that Hannibal had both hands in view. “The city must seem stifling and everything so strange. A Cenobium is surely a very dismal place for a child.”

“I managed a very elegant suite for her there,” Hannibal said, sipping the coffee that Will preferred for breakfast over their usual tea. “It was used to house the Queen Mother after her arrest. It is peaceful, with a lovely view of the garden.”

“Nothing is lovely when viewed through bars,” Will remarked, patting his mouth with his napkin. “Can we at least see to her comfort?”

“Yes, that much I insisted on,” Hannibal said, lowering his cup. “Incidentally, it would be of great help to me if you could go in my place to make purchases on her behalf. I will be tied up in audiences with several judges today and will not be able to tend to it as soon as I should prefer.”

“I will see to it,” Will offered, smiling when Hannibal reached out to grasp his hand, fingers twining in his. There was no kiss to follow, it was merely for the sake of touching him, a reassurance that Will was within reach. “She has nothing at all?”

“A few undergarments and another dress Emily provided,” Hannibal confirmed. “That aside, she is completely at the mercy of what the Cenobium can offer.”

“Without her measurements, it will be somewhat tricky,” Will said, giving Hannibal's hand a squeeze, “but I will order a small wardrobe for her, just simple things to see her through until we may take her home.”

Hannibal did kiss his hand then, lifting it to press his lips to Will's knuckles before asking, “You really would have her at Hartford House?”

“Yes, of course,” Will said, surprised that he should ask, “if she desires such a thing. Hartford House is where she was born. She has every right to call it home.”

Hannibal rubbed his thumb over Will's knuckles, his brow wrinkling in thought as he said, “Abigail wished for me to tell you that she was sorry.”

“Sorry? What on earth for?” Will asked, echoing his frown.

“She told me that the day she left Marsham, she said things to you which she regrets,” Hannibal told him. “She wanted you to know that she's sorry for what she said, and she thanks you for being so kind to her.”

Will smiled, and said, “Her mother would be very proud of her for that. I know I am. I had quite put it out of my mind, but I will be sure that we make up properly when we are all together again.”

Hannibal smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling in that way Will so admired. “You truly are a wonder, Will Lecter-Graham.”

“I imagine I would have to be in order to suit such a peculiar Alpha as you,” Will said, his full mouth curving in a smile that made Hannibal's widen. “Speaking of peculiar, I did mean to ask, Hannibal—why did you tell Abigail you didn't know who her father was?”

Hannibal's smile faded somewhat. His fingers toyed with Will's own, the same fingers that had helped to dress him this morning rather than hand him into Berger's expert care.

“I have always known you to be honest,” Will said, sensing his disquiet. “Sometimes brutally so. Is there some reason you wish to keep Abigail from knowing who her father is?”

“The reason is that it would do more harm than good just now. The man who fathered her was somewhat notorious in the area and had run afoul of Grandfather more than once,” Hannibal said, his fingers stroking Will's skin, seeking comfort as well as giving it. “He was a poacher, a thief, and had a habit of using his smooth tongue to worm his way out of the consequences. He had no interest in Melinda outside of the distraction she provided and was the one who suggested she name me as the baby's father.”

“What a horrid man!” Will said, appalled that Melinda had fallen in with such a terrible excuse for a person. “What on earth ever became of him?”

“He stole from someone far less forgiving than Grandfather,” Hannibal said, fiddling with his coffee cup before dropping his hand to Winston's head, his other hand still firmly on Will's own. “About two years after I left for the front, he was hanged and then buried in a pauper's grave. I couldn't even tell her where to find his final resting place, should she ask.”

His amber eyes found Will's and held them, familiar softness filling his voice when he reasoned, “Abigail has quite enough to trouble her. I doubt learning of her parentage would do her any favors.”
“I admit I am conflicted on that count,” Will said, frowning. “Secrets cause nothing but trouble, do they not? But there is no reason to rush into further disappointment for her. Perhaps if the Fosters show interest, they might speak of it to Abigail.”

“They have expressed interest,” Hannibal said, relieved to have the subject at temporary rest. “Grandfather has been in contact with them since he received your letter regarding the events at Marsham Heath. They are eager to see her, if she would be amenable to such a thing, and as she has asked after them I see no reason why we cannot bring them together again.”

“That is wonderful news,” Will said, a small measure of his concern for Abigail lessening in the knowledge that her family was hopeful for a reunion. “I had intended to reach out to them. I am grateful that Grandfather thought to do so.”

“He moves with remarkable speed for a man who insists he is teetering at Death’s door,” Hannibal said, taking a sip of his coffee around a wry smirk. He settled his cup back carefully and added, “In the meantime, we will take the best possible care of Abigail and see to it that her stay at the Cenobium is comfortable.”

“I will set out when Jack’s men return,” Will said, eager to get started. “Hopefully, I will be able to join you this afternoon, though it will take some time to get everything arranged.”

“I will wait with you until they arrive,” Hannibal offered, kissing Will’s hand again before releasing it entirely. “Finish your breakfast, Will. We have a long day ahead of us, though I hope we can be ready to set out for Hartford by teatime.”

“Surely we should wait until morning?” Will said, perplexed. “That is no small distance and I do not relish the idea of applying myself to it again in such short order.”

“I don’t think it will take as long as you imagine. Last night’s paper announced that the rail line has added Chesterton to their schedule,” Hannibal told him, grinning at Will’s unabashed surprise. “The stop is fully functional and the line is heading north.”

“Chesterton? That is barely two hours from Hartford by coach!” Will said, delighted. “They shall soon begin construction of our little station, and far ahead of schedule.”

“I thought you might enjoy that tidbit,” Hannibal said, sneaking another slice of ham to Winston when he thought he had Will thoroughly distracted. “I hoped I could persuade you to take the train with me tonight. We could let a room in Chesterton and ride the rest of the way in tomorrow.”

“Grandfather and Mina will be very surprised,” Will said, delighted by the prospect. “But what of Winston?”

“I would suggest that he take the coach with Berger from here,” Hannibal said, noting that Will’s eyebrows didn’t approve in the least. “However, knowing how fond you are of him—”

“How fond we are of him,” Will corrected.

“—I would venture to guess that he can ride behind one of us when he tires,” Hannibal said, reaching down to rub Winston’s ears. “He’s a smart little fellow and not shy of horses, by any means. If he cannot manage, we’ll hire a cart. There’s a posting house there, I’m sure they can manage something suitable.”

“I think that is a wonderful idea,” Will said, looking forward to it, even if the proposal had every indication of being for his safety more than convenience. “Thank you for suggesting it, Hannibal. I’m looking forward to the journey, now, rather than dreading how far it is. I only wish we were taking Abigail with us when we go.”

“The process we’ve embarked on will require quite some time, unfortunately,” Hannibal said, sighing a little in disappointment. “But soon, perhaps. I have an appointment with the Lord Chancellor and I am hopeful he will push through my request. In the meantime, we will prepare a place for her when she can return.”

Mr. Black intruded on them, somber and stiff with dignity, to announce, “There are three officers out front, my Lords. They claim they have come at your command?”

“Ah, indeed they have,” Will said, laying his napkin aside and pushing his chair back to stand. “We should get going, Hannibal, if we are to make the train this afternoon.”

“Shall I send someone to purchase tickets and acquire a schedule, my Lord?” Mr. Black asked, so thoroughly pleased to have Will back that he oozed satisfaction. “When should you like to depart?”

“Send for the schedule, Mr. Black,” Hannibal said, rising as well. “We will see where we are after our business is conducted.”

“Very good, my Lord.”
Will started around the table but Hannibal snagged him back by his arm, turning him to loop both arms around him. Will grinned, eyes closing in a moment of pure happiness to be held against Hannibal’s chest in such a spontaneous, impulsive way.

“Do not slip your guards,” Hannibal warned, his breath stirring Will’s curls. “Or else I shall be extraordinarily put out with you.”

“I will keep them at my side at all times,” Will said, loosening his arms to step back. “I’ll take Winston, as well, if you can bear to be parted from him?”

Hannibal chuckled at that, both of them moving to the foyer to gather their coats, gloves, and hats, Mr. Black assisting in his unobtrusive way. Winston danced with excitement, wriggling enough that Will laughed aloud at his antics, nearly unable to clip his lead on him.

Hannibal looked out at the men while Will was doing so, just to confirm that they were the same guards he had packed off with Will the morning prior. He chided himself for being overly cautious, but a look at Will’s smiling, beautiful, beloved face reminded him that no measure was too extreme when it came to protecting his mate.

“Is something wrong?” Will asked, cocking his head as he rose.

“Here, quickly,” Hannibal said, ducking his head in a quick offering of a kiss which Will granted him, smiling at the way his husband purred. “Now I am properly armed.”

Will chuckled and patted Hannibal’s pocket watch through his clothing, telling him, “I will always protect you, Hannibal. I hope it brings you the best of luck today for Abigail’s sake.”

With that, he moved swiftly through the door Mr. Black held wide, skimming down the stairs with enviable grace, Winston trotting at his side.

Hannibal sighed, watching them go out to be surrounded by guards, the entire small party heading up to the Row. It hurt to let Will go off without him, as if something inside of him was pulled away along with his husband. Bond or no bond, Will was as much a part of him as the heart that beat inside his chest and the blood that flowed through his veins and he needed him just as desperately.

“I will find a way to fix it,” he whispered, watching Will vanish out of sight, his heart giving a funny, familiar little lurch in response to his absence. “I will find a way to complete our bond, Will. I promise.”

And Hannibal Lecter always kept his promises.

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Despite the unhappy circumstances, Will was able to go about his duties with a light heart, settled in the confidence that Hannibal would find a way to bring Abigail back under their protection, if not into their home. With that hope in mind, he moved up and down the Row ordering things to help her while away the hours and keep her comfortable. Books, blankets, a basket of embroidery tools, stationary and a pen set complete with ink—he purchased everything he could think of that might distract her from her worries and keep her hands busy. He saved the dress shop for last, knowing it would take the longest and hoping he could arrange something fairly quickly for Abigail’s use.

The guards were more than happy to stay on the street with Winston to rest and smoke, exchanging low conversation as Will took himself inside the busy shop.

Mr. Avery’s sister store never failed to impress with its grandeur and Will took his time to enjoy the sights before him. The windows were as beautiful from the inside as they were without, the latest fashions on display for gentlemen, ladies, and Omegas. Will wandered through the store, past the rare ready-made items to the women’s department. The staff, no fools by anyone’s standards, quickly conveyed his arrival to every waiting ear. It was unsettling and odd to Will to be known on sight by strangers, to hear his title whispered, but not his name. A familiar sense of being out of place gripped him. Though for entirely different reasons than before, it was still discomfiting and he wondered how much of the whispers involved his role in the Moseley tragedy.

He ignored it as best he could and sought assistance from an Omega who seemed surprised by the version of Lord Clarges they found awaiting them. They rallied, however, and were very pleasant with him, their welcome chasing away the uneasy feeling of being an outsider.
After listening attentively to the situation, they helped Will in arranging both ready-made as well as custom garb for Abigail. Simple dresses, underthings, nightclothes, thick stockings, a suitable coat, and a robe to shield her against the cold of the Cenobium were all added to the list. They also very kindly suggested he order a small bolt of cloth and a sewing kit to amuse her, which Will thought was a fine idea.

As the pleasant, smiling assistant handed off the parts of his order that could be packaged and sent ahead, Will idly glanced around at the displays again, feeling a draw to their beauty that he thought had died beneath his father’s leather belt. He spied a beautiful hat on display, the pale ribbons worked with flowers reminiscent of those in the meadows at Marsham Heath.

The assistant, taking instant notice of his interest, promptly moved around the display to pluck it up and offer it to him. “This is one of our newer styles, quite the fashion on the Continent,” they told him. “The style and color is just perfect for a young person nearly an adult.”

“Is it? Suitable, I mean? I have no head for fashion,” Will said, offering an embarrassed smile that made them chuckle.

“A Lord tends to make trends rather than follow them,” they said, eyes twinkling. “But in this case, I can say that any young person would adore this hat. Shall I box it for you?”

“Please do. Oh, and might I have a card, please?” he requested, and was promptly provided one, as well as a pen.

He pondered a moment, hoping to find words to convey that there was no need of forgiveness between them, and finally wrote on the little card:

For the walks we will soon take together,
Lords Clarges, Will and Hannibal

“Could I put this in with the hat?” Will asked, uncertain if her belongings would be searched, but hoping it wouldn’t be confiscated.

They promptly tucked the card inside the hat and nestled it in the box with a wink.

“We’ll have it all delivered to the Cenobium by the end of the day, my Lord,” Will was told. “The patterned items should be ready by tomorrow. I’ll have every seamstress on the dresses. I’m acquainted with several of the Cenobites, as well, so I’ll ask if they can do the adjustments for her.”

“Thank you so very much. You’ve been very helpful,” Will said, genuinely relieved. He made a mental note to add a generous commission when the bill arrived. “Might I have your name?”

“Nichola, my Lord,” they said, putting the top on the box and tying it with a gorgeous length of ribbon, looping it with a knot to make a little handle at the top. “And we are always more than happy to help. You really are every bit as beautiful as the papers claim, and ever so kind. Lord Clarges is a very lucky man, but I am certain he knows that.”

Will blushed but smiled, murmuring a diffident thank you to the older Omega. He began to collect his things to go, but Nichola very innocently said, “By the by, my Lord, I noticed your interest in several of our displays. Might I prevail upon you to try some of our newer fashions?”

“Oh, I am sorry, I wouldn’t do you any good, I’m afraid,” Will said, intrigued despite himself. He had glanced several times at the Omegan section of the store but had no reason to go over there when purchasing for Abigail. “My taste in clothing is somewhat funeral, according to my husband.”

They laughed, a lovely and soft sound that teased an answering smile from Will.

“Well, if you’ll pardon my being forward,” Nichola said, gathering up Will’s hat and gloves as they came around the counter. “I think I have several items that could have been created just for you. I would love to give you a taste of what our Omegan store has to offer our Omegan customers. If you’ll just come right this way...”

“I’m not certain I should,” Will protested, but it was weak even to his own ears, his blue eyes already flicking around the displays as they moved into the Omegan section.

“It’ll only be a moment, my Lord,” Nichola assured him, their eyes dancing with impish delight. “If you wouldn’t mind?”

Will smiled, surprising himself with his eagerness to go along with it, but it was a rare occasion he had to try anything other than the strictly male clothing he had in his wardrobe and his night at the Masquerade had piqued his curiosity.

It didn’t take as long as Will feared, and it felt wonderful to shed his clothing and don Omegan gear under Nichola’s watchful eye. They had not spoken lightly of the pieces he tried seeming to be made just for him. All of it fit with near
perfection, and what didn’t fit, they made note of and pinned. Will feared he would be pressed to purchase, but it seemed to contain his lovely shop assistant just to fit things to him with a discerning, watchful eye. Nichola even measured him personally, just to have his numbers on file should he ever decide to purchase, he was assured.

The whole flattering encounter lasted just under an hour, but it ran Will behind enough that he was in a rush as he left, eager to return for news of Abigail’s case.

He was moving a bit faster than he should’ve been and trying to put his hat on as well when he bumped into someone, his gloves tipping from his arm.

“Gracious, watch where you’re going!”

The gloves were snatched in mid air and Will straightened in startlement, saying, “Timothy!”

His brother-in-law raised his head, his pale eyes widening with surprise equal to Will’s own. A shocked laugh erupted out of him and he asked, “What on earth are you playing at? Why are you dressed in that get-up? You’ve shocked the life out of me! Are you practicing, my dear?”

“Timothy, what on earth are you talking about?” Will asked, hastily taking his gloves back. His guards spied him and drew closer on high alert, Winston straining at his leash. “Practicing for what, precisely? Being a gentleman? Should I suggest some practice of your own?”

“Will?” Timothy said, and laughed again, another bark of surprise that exceeded the first, threaded with a note of unease. “I beg your pardon, I just—I thought you were Mina.”

Will’s brow furrowed and he frowned. “I find it hard to think that a man could mistake someone else for his wife, even her twin. And why on earth would she be dressed in male clothing? I am certain even Mina would hesitate to do something so outrageous.”

“I do apologize, my dear, I was simply surprised! You know well enough that I’ve always found your resemblance to be positively uncanny,” Timothy said, smirking. “There were times when I would visit and I wasn’t sure which was which, hm? The two of you standing together pretty as you please.”

“Mina has always been somewhat shorter than I,” Will reminded him, baffled by his insistence. “Albeit without her shoes.”

“Well, there we have it,” Timothy said, as if Will had made his point for him. “I have never seen my dear Mina without her shoes.”

“That must make your marriage bed a somewhat dangerous place, mustn’t it?”

Timothy laughed, delighted, raking Will with an appreciative look as he said, “Aren’t we a pert little thing these days? Your sister’s presence is like a fine, aged port—it is best enjoyed in small increments and on rare occasions.”

“You must prefer your port on very rare occasions, indeed, as my sister has been my guest for quite some time,” Will said, deciding that he disliked Timothy immensely, even more than he had when he’d come courting Mina. “I find I am suddenly feeling much more generous in my invitation towards her. At least in my house she is properly recognized, as am I.”

“Ah, you cruel creature! Come now, Will, don’t be so annoyed! I haven’t seen you in, what, six years? Seven? You’ve grown,” he said, stepping back to look at him, ignoring the press of people spilling around them. Will’s skin prickled at that look, his hackles rising with distaste when he recognized the gleam in his brother-in-law’s eyes. The trail of his gaze was a sticky touch that lingered on Will’s mouth the longest, tracing the curve of his lower lip with relish.

“You simply must forgive me, your resemblance to your sister is uncanny,” Timothy said, murmuring the words with a smile Will wanted to wash from his memory. He reached up to touch Will’s face and he tipped his head back to avoid it, distaste wrinkling his nose. It made his brother-in-law laugh, for whatever ugly reason, and say, “You act like her as well. It truly is remarkable. Why, I daresay no one could fault me for being unable to tell the two of you apart in full dress, hm?”

Will bristled, outrage rising when Timothy brushed a finger down his nose and added, “Without the clothing would be another matter altogether, wouldn’t it?”

Will lifted his hand and brushed Timothy’s aside, icy disdain coloring his voice when he said, “Do not presume to speak to me in such a familiar way, Lord Rathmore. We are strangers to one another, and should remain so if you insist on being coarse in your manner.”

“Coarse? Goodness!” Timothy huffed, amused. “Quite a cold little thing, aren’t you? Careful, Will, else everyone will believe the rumors are true.”
Will stared at him, eyes sparking with ire.

“A frigid spouse makes a man's eyes wander,” Timothy said, giving Will a smug smile as if he'd said something even remotely clever.

“Is that the excuse you give for your own behavior regarding my sister?” Will asked, flat and cold. He had to admit, he was rather pleased when Timothy's smile faltered.

“I would have thought you would be more cautious, Will,” he said, taking a wary step back, “considering the trouble that seems to follow you, according to my wife. Her letters have been most enlightening in regards to your various accidents. It's almost as if you've become a target, isn't it? I wonder who on earth would ever want to hurt someone as lovely as you?”

“Someone who clearly has no idea what they're getting into,” Will warned, putting more distance between them. Timothy's brows rose and another unsavory smile curled his lips.

“Do have a care, Will. I should hate to hear anything terrible has happened to you. In times like these, you never know who you can trust,” he purred, and loomed closer to whisper, “Give my regards to my wife, my dear.”

With that, he touched his hat in parting and moved around Will into the store.

“Everything alright, Lord Clarges?” the Captain asked, handing over Winston's lead with his arrival.

“Yes, thank you,” Will said, but he cast a glance back at the shop as they moved away, a terrible unease casting a pall over his day. “Everything is just fine.”

Hannibal waited patiently where he sat, a small frown pursing his lips as the minutes slipped by. Mr. Buddish shifted in the chair next to him, equally restless, but they had spent several precious hours arranging this meeting and could not afford to squander it.

“You have no proof that this child is your lost stepdaughter, is that correct?”

The somber, serious elderly man seated behind his massive desk removed his spectacles to peer at Hannibal, his gaze direct and sharp as if he might cut through any lies with a well-aimed glare. He'd spent over an hour going through the paperwork they'd amassed in support of guardianship, and only once every line was inspected did he deign to speak at last.

Hannibal's spine straightened a touch and he returned the look, secure in his position as a noble, as a Lord, and as a man known for his strength of character.

“No, Lord Chancellor, none at all,” he admitted. “Only the witness of those in my employ, the testimony of the girl's deceased mother, and a midwife who refuses to admit the truth of the matter.”

“The truth of the matter,” the Lord Chancellor echoed, settling back in his chair in a groan of wood. “As you see it.”

“Lord Chancellor, the child’s heritage notwithstanding,” Mr. Buddish said, no more cowed by his authority than Hannibal was, “the fact is that Miss Hobbs has no other means to live in the world than to rely on the state for assistance. What my client is offering is support—quietly and with minimal fuss. Assigning guardianship of Miss Hobbs to the Lords Clarges is no hindrance in any respect to your authority and she has no fortunes they wish to lay hands on. They merely wish to see her cared for when her only other option is an orphanage, or worse.”

The Lord Chancellor tapped his spectacles against the papers before him, a frown quivering from the corners of his mouth all the way down his jowls.

“I am not reluctant to sign these papers on any count of worry over your intentions,” he said, watching Hannibal with his rheumy but critical eyes. “It is the perception I fear, Lord Clarges. You and your mate were there the day that Hobbs killed his wife and attempted to kill his daughter. I realize that you saved her life and feel responsible for her, but there are those who would find this very troubling, indeed.”

“Had I any desire to acquire a daughter, Lord Chancellor,” Hannibal said, a wry smile quirking his mouth, “I can assure you, I would not need to arrange a tragedy to orphan one first.”

“You understand that guardianship does not guarantee safety from the reach of our laws, Lord Clarges?”

“He understands that very well, Lord Chancellor,” Mr. Buddish said, “as I am employed to ensure that he does not run afoul of any single one of our laws.”

“And have you carefully considered what this will do to your household?” the Lord Chancellor asked, reaching again for the papers Mr. Buddish had prepared. “From the day that you take charge of Miss Hobbs' affairs, the Lecter name will be...
linked through history to a series of grisly murders, the blasphemy of cannibalism, and the horrors of a family sliced to ribbons at its very foundations.”

“I have considered it,” Hannibal said, leaning back in his chair, his fingers drumming a restless rhythm on the wooden arm where his hand rested.

“And your children?” the Lord Chancellor inquired. “Have you considered what they will face as they age? What Society will whisper to them?”

His immediate, knee-jerk response was to say that he didn’t care about popular opinion, but the words gave him pause. He thought of Will and the children he hoped they would have some day. His mate was more than up to the task of dealing with gossips, but talk could be very damaging for a young child, as he well knew.

“What of Miss Hobbs’ blood relatives?” the Lord Chancellor asked, knowing he’d struck a chord. “The Fosters, was it?”

“His Grace has been in contact with them, Lord Chancellor,” Mr. Buddish said, ruthlessly filling the silence. “They have expressed their desire to become reacquainted with Miss Hobbs and hope she will accept their invitation to reconcile.”

“I see,” the Lord Chancellor said, thumbing through the papers. “Might I suggest something to you, Lord Clarges? On behalf of your Grandfather, who has always been a friend to me and who has suffered quite enough at the hands of your father?”

Hannibl stiffened at the mention of his father, his voice taut with unhappiness when he said, “Yes, Lord Chancellor.”

“Rather than pursue what is clearly an action taken from an excess of misplaced guilt and relief, consider suing for emancipation on her behalf through Mr. Buddish,” he said, his eyes resting on Hannibal with the crushing weight of long experience, “which I would be more than happy to provide as it would absolve the state from the burden of her care. Then she could, with the full approval of the law, apply to change her surname, perhaps to that of her mother’s family?”

Hannibal swallowed hard, his heart thundering in his chest but he kept a firm hold on it, keenly aware that Will could sense his disquiet and not wishing to disturb him.

“I have only just found this child after sixteen years,” Hannibal said, his voice husky with strain. “Would you ask me to abandon her again, Lord Chancellor?”

“There is nothing in my suggestion that would prevent you from being the child’s benefactor,” the Lord Chancellor said, cocking a bushy eyebrow in Hannibal’s direction. “Indeed, she will need every support she can get should she be suddenly burdened with the worries of adulthood. Wardship simply cannot take place while her father is still alive, Lord Clarges, you must see that? She is not an orphan.”

Hannibal frowned and Mr. Buddish cleared his throat, saying, “We all of us know that she soon will be, Lord Chancellor. Be it by bullet or noose, Garret Jacob Hobbs will die for his crimes.”

“And until he does, he is legally her father,” the Lord Chancellor said. “That sort of thinking may have carried you past my younger peers, Mr. Buddish, but I have been in this position for longer than you have drawn breath on this earth, young man. I know the law better than I know my own wife, gods rest his blessed soul.”

“But an emancipation can be accomplished whether her father lives or not,” Hannibal said, getting a small nod in response. “And we can act as her benefactors.”

“With her blessing,” the Lord Chancellor amended. “Provided you remain anonymous, there will be no discussion regarding the propriety of the arrangement.”

Hannibal’s cheeks flushed with quiet fury at that, but it was a risk always associated with such actions and he knew how it would look to those who found the worst in everyone—a young person in a vulnerable position with a powerful patron always drew speculation and talk, the more unsavory, the more popular it became.

“With a legal name change, she can become Abigail Foster, unknown to the public eye, rather than the infamous ward of the Lords Clarges, every detail of her person known to the world at large by virtue of your association,” the Lord Chancellor said, making a graceful gesture with one hand as if the answer were simple. “Once the emancipation is granted, you could arrange for her to live in a way that best suits you all, and no one ever need know what became of Miss Abigail Hobbs.”

“Surely, the trial—”

“My colleagues and I have arranged to interview Miss Hobbs in the coming days to record her recollection of the events. Should there be a trial, she will not be called to witness, considering her youth,” the Lord Chancellor said, cutting Mr. Buddish
off. “A trial, however, is questionable at this point. The facts being what they are, we have been instructed by the highest order to see this case and its details settled as quickly and quietly as possible.”

He leveled another somber look at Hannibal, who had withdrawn into pensive consideration of what he was being told.

“I can assure you, given your own statement as well as those of Magistrate Crawford and your spouse, Miss Hobbs is, at this point, seen as nothing more than another of her father’s victims,” the Lord Chancellor said. “Should her testimony lend credence to your claim of her innocence, we will strive to ensure that this tragedy does not continue to cast a pall over her future, and I would hope you should grant her the same consideration.”

A heavy silence fell over them, a silence in which Mr. Buddish watched Hannibal, ready to act on whatever decision he made.

“Naturally, until Garret Jacob Hobbs is accounted for and imprisoned,” the Lord Chancellor said, “or else shot, Miss Hobbs will remain in the safekeeping of Our Gods of Unity Cenobium.”

“Lord Chancellor, if we could take her to the countryside with us, we could arrange for her safety,” Hannibal said.

“I encourage you, Lord Clarges, to use this time of separation to consider what is best, not just for your need to make amends, but for your family, for the Lecter name, for the children you will someday father,” the Lord Chancellor warned, “but most importantly for Miss Hobbs.”

Hannibal swallowed hard, wetting his dry lips, his eyebrows knitting together in a frown. “I will discuss the details with my spouse, if you would be so kind as to communicate with Miss Hobbs?”

“I will see to it that she is made aware of every option available to her,” he was promised. “If and when you decide to proceed with an emancipation petition, Mr. Buddish here can provide the necessary paperwork at Miss Hobbs’ request, and I will see to it that the legal necessities are granted. From there, she will be free to decide for herself, which is, I believe, somewhat of a novelty for most of us in life.”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, his thoughts turning to Will and how he had flourished, armed in the knowledge that his choices were his own, “it certainly is.”

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There was very little for Will to do on his return. Berger had Hannibal’s valise packed and Will had come with nothing, including Jimmy. Their respective wardrobes installed at Chelsea House would remain there for their convenience, Berger had already packed another valise of Will’s things to take on the train, Jack Crawford’s men had been sent back to Moseley, and Winston was snoring with bliss on the rug before the parlor fire.

Will sighed, temporarily at a loss with nothing to distract him. He heard the door and got to his feet, eagerly hoping Hannibal had returned, though he had no sense of such through his bond.

Footsteps thudded softly down the runner in the hallway before a sharp rap came on the door, followed by Mr. Black’s arrival with a silver salver.

Surprised, Will took the card he presented, frowning when he saw the lovely configuration and the swirling script that read, ‘Henriette W. of Kirk’.

“Oh dear,” Will breathed, reading the card again. “Bring her in, Mr. Black, we must not keep her waiting.”

“Right away, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, taking the card back with smooth grace. “I will have refreshments sent directly. Should you like me to remove Mr. Winston?”

“No, he’s fine,” Will said, fussing with his neckerchief, even though Nichola had done an expert job of tying it for him. Mr. Black left to fetch their visitor, and a more surprising one Will could not imagine. Meeting Prince Bert at a Masquerade was one thing, but entertaining his wife was quite another and Will felt his own lack in practice with such things.

“Lady Withome of Kirk, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, admitting a smiling beauty whose expensive perfume complemented the underlying fragrance of her Omegan scent. She spilled into the room in a froth of lace and excitement, her brown eyes sparkling and one beringed hand extended. Her vibrant energy filled the room and Will relaxed, smiling in response, chiding himself that any wife of Prince Bert must surely have a sense of humor.

“Here, come take my hand, Lord Clarges!” she said, splaying her fingers. “Don’t be shy and please don’t stand on formality. Here, please, come sit with me.”
Will did as he was bidden, taking her hand in his and guiding her to sit with him. She settled with a happy sigh, arranging her skirts around her and angling her head to his, saying to the footman who had accompanied her, “Wait in the foyer, please, Adam.”

Will waited for her to get comfortable before he ventured, “We are very honored to host you, Lady Withome.”

“Oh, thank you!” she said, flashing her small Omegan fangs in a wide, delighted smile. “One of my girls came in from the Row and mentioned you had arrived back in the Capital and I couldn’t let this moment pass. Bertram was agog at you, my dear. ‘Henry,’ he said to me, ‘you must meet him. He’s positively divine and he hit me, so be sure to scold him.’”

Will laughed, hoping it had not offended her, and asked, “Did he happen to mention the circumstances?”

“No, he values himself far too highly to implicate himself in any of his actions,” she said with a soft laugh, idly smoothing a stray coil of curly hair from her cheek. “But trust me when I say I know my husband well enough to guess what he was up to. He isn’t nearly as circumspect as he imagines he is. I do hope you hit him hard?”

“Hard enough to make my point,” Will said, warming to her. The tea service arrived and Will poured for them in silence, going through the ritual of filling cups and sipping before any conversation marched ahead.

“I am so very pleased to finally meet you myself,” she said, admiring the pattern on the teacup. “I trust that Hannibal is as smitten with you as my husband is?”

“He has his moments,” Will said, taking a sip of his tea with a small smile.

“It has been an age since he’s visited,” she sighed. “I’ll send an invitation this Season. Bertram and I throw an annual holiday ball that I insist you attend.”

“Thank you, that would be very lovely,” Will said, sensing there was something more behind her visit than pleasantries and meeting someone her husband expressed an interest in.

A cup of tea and two biscuits later, he found out what it was.

“There is a most odd story making its way through the Ministry of Justice,” she said, placing her half-eaten biscuit on her saucer. “I wondered if you might have any information, given that it occurred at Moseley?”

“Oh?” Will asked, brows up. There had been little hope to keep things secret, as Hannibal had said, but Will wasn’t sure just how much had escaped ahead of them. The press had, against all expectation, not published their name in conjunction with the issue, which Will felt the heavy hand of Grandfather behind.

“Surely you know what I speak of,” she coaxed, smiling. “The papers mentioned that your estate, Marsham Heath, is situated just outside of Moseley. Missing children and cannibals and all sorts of horrors! Bertram refused to find out for me, claiming that what I knew somehow found its way to every waiting ear at a speed which shocks him. Terrible man, implying I am a gossip!”

Will seized on that statement, knowing well enough the power that whispers in drawing rooms had on public opinion.

“Apparently, the murderer’s daughter is already in custody!” she went on, putting her cup down with care. “It was all over the papers about her. Do you know of her?”

“I do know of her,” Will admitted, sipping his tea to fill the silence.

“It seems most people think she must have helped him,” Henriette said, her voice lowered in a whisper. “They’re calling her a siren, luring those girls to their deaths at her father’s hands. I don’t believe she could do such a thing, but I am a mother and my heart goes out to a child who has lost so much. I find I am in the minority on that count. What do you think?”

Will blinked, considering very carefully before he leaned towards her and asked, “Can you keep a secret, Lady Withome?”

Her eyes widened with excitement and she said, “Trust me, my dear, I am the soul of discretion!”

Will smiled and put his cup down, turning to face her and lowering his voice to a mere whisper to say, “Then allow me to tell you of the tragedy that befell Miss Abigail Hobbs.”

Hannibal arrived back to Chelsea House to find the faint scent of another Omega still lingering in the air. It was familiar somehow, but he couldn’t place it, and asked Mr. Black as he handed off his hat and gloves, “Who has called?”

“Lady Withome of Kirk, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, wrinkling his nose at the faint grime that had settled atop Hannibal’s hat.
“Henry was here?” Hannibal echoed. “It's a shame I missed her. Did she have someone with her? An Omega?”

“She was quite alone, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, heaving an exasperated sigh. “Honestly, my Lord, you have known her for years—”

“Don’t scold me, Black,” Hannibal warned, annoyed with himself. “I don’t go peeking under the skirts of every person in my acquaintance!”

“Well, that is a relief,” Will called, jostled in the doorway to the parlor when Winston hurtled past him. Hannibal crouched to pet the excited dog, smiling at his mate, who beckoned him into the parlor.

“Have you any news?” Will asked, anxiously watching him as Hannibal closed the door behind him.

“Not what we should wish to hear,” Hannibal admitted, drawing Will down to sit next to him as he settled. Winston reared up to balance his front feet on Will's leg and Will absently stroked his head, giving the dog the attention he desired. “The Lord Chancellor has suggested we seek emancipation for Abigail rather than guardianship.”

Will drew back at the abrupt nature of that suggestion, but in seconds both the furrow in his brow as well as his frown faded.

“She would, for all purposes, be considered an adult,” he mused, then asked, “Would she be held accountable as one should they decide to hold her responsible for her father's crimes?”

“I have it from the highest authority presiding over the case that unless Abigail gives some type of confession,” Hannibal said, his fingers seeking Will's, “they are prepared to release her the moment her father is in custody. They will be interviewing her privately in the next several days, but her chances are very good, no matter what the news has been saying.”

“I have every hope that the news will soon reflect a different opinion,” Will said. “Please, don't scold me for doing so, Hannibal, but Lady Withome called and I unburdened myself to her in the matter of Abigail Hobbs.”

“Did you, now?” Hannibal asked, impressed. “I take it you did so with the understanding that she has never kept a secret in her life?”

“She's kept one that I know of,” Will pointed out, cocking a brow at Hannibal's embarrassed flush. “Though perhaps she never meant to and it was solely your fault that you had no idea she is Omegan.”

“That perfume of hers makes my head ache,” Hannibal said in his own defense. “But what did you tell her?”

“The truth, though I left our actions out of things,” Will said, adding, “Abigail is a child nearly an orphan who is facing the noose for crimes she had no part in, nearly murdered by the father she loved and trusted on the heels of watching her mother be killed right in front of her. Lady Withome was beside herself with horror on Abigail's behalf and quite agitated that she must get to a luncheon the moment I finished. It was a very different story than the papers have been printing and I trust that the truth of things will soon be reflected in popular opinion, should she have any sway in people's hearts.”

“She does, and then some,” Hannibal said, ruffling Will's curls with fond tenderness. “My brilliant mate.”

“Practical, Hannibal,” Will corrected, though he blushed with pleasure. “I had thought at the time we would be bringing Abigail into our family. I wanted the truth of her situation to be known, not this perception everyone has of her as complicit in her father's vile actions. It is bad enough they think she is truly his daughter and might someday exhibit the same madness that gripped him. But we will not be taking her home to Hartford with us, will we? At least, not as our daughter?”

Hannibal loosed a soft sigh, his hand falling to cup Will's cheek, thumb rubbing beneath his sorrowful blue eye.

“It is not a decision I would make, but it isn't up to us, Will. The Lord Chancellor made a convincing argument not to pursue guardianship,” Hannibal said. “The publicity of it alone would ensure she would be known wherever she went. His suggestion was to have her apply for emancipation, which he promised to grant, and then we could quietly arrange for a legal name change and support her financially as she makes her way forward. He suggested she take her mother's maiden name and live her life as Abigail Foster, unknown to anyone as the child of Garret Jacob Hobbs.”

Will's frown returned, but it was thoughtful, sad.

“I admit to being disappointed,” he whispered, sliding his hand from Winston's head to draw Hannibal's own from his cheek. He held it in his lap, twining their fingers together as his mind worked the problem. “But there is wisdom in such a suggestion. He knows the law backwards and forwards, I am sure, and has no doubt seen similar cases unravel to the detriment of all involved. But of course it is Abigail's decision and not ours. Yet, I strongly feel that if she prefers guardianship, then we should move forward with it and take the consequences as they come.”
“As do I,” Hannibal said, lifting Will’s hand to kiss it. “The Lord Chancellor has asked the All-Mother Superior to discuss the options with Abigail. However she chooses to proceed, Mr. Buddish will deal with the necessary details and send word on to Hartford. As for you and I, we have Grandfather’s gathering to suffer through, and should focus our energies on a problem we can tackle.”

“One crisis at a time?” Will asked, chuckling softly. “Well, at least the things we purchased for Abigail should keep her occupied.”

“Were you able to procure clothing for her, as well?” Hannibal asked, his fingertips seeking out the pulse in Will’s wrist in a light caress.

“Yes, the assistant at the tailor’s was incredibly helpful,” Will said, adding with a bemused smile, “Nichola was their name. I must be sure to add a suitable tip for the effort they undertook. They even managed to persuade me into trying on a number of garments. I could not believe how well they fit already. They truly do quality work.”

“A number of garments, you say?” Hannibal asked, his tone all silky innocence and a wicked smirk curving his mouth. He made a mental note to double the commission for the staff for so expertly maneuvering Will into a final fitting without giving away the surprise.

And his beautiful, guileless mate had so little dealings with such places that he saw nothing odd about it in the least, only saying with faint longing, “Oh, yes, all manner of clothing, it seemed nearly one of everything in the store. I suspect they were hoping I would place an order.”

“You should have,” Hannibal told him, controlling his glee with difficulty lest Will sense it through his bond. “The wardrobe we ordered when I first returned is merely a skeleton, Will. A gentleman’s closet needs flesh to round it out.”

“Perhaps later,” Will said, his hand falling to his stomach to rub just below his navel. He wasn’t even aware of doing so, but Hannibal noted it and tactfully changed the subject, asking, “Do we know when we should set out for the station? I find I’m eager to return to Hartford and check on Grandfather.”

“Mr. Black provided me with a schedule,” Will said, relieved by the shift in conversation. “It looks as if a train is leaving within the hour, if you’d like to try to make it?”

“I cannot imagine how we would be delayed,” Hannibal said, adding with mock surprise, “Oh, how marvelous, another carpet unexplored.”

“Hannibal!” Will scolded, appalled but amused. “We haven’t time to dally!”

“No?” Hannibal said, abjectly bereft and doleful as he kissed Will’s hand again, pleased when Will didn’t pull away.

“Your appetites are far greater than you first led me to believe, Lord Clarges,” Will pointed out, urging Winston down so he could reach for his husband.

“My appetites have grown with such a succulent dish before me,” Hannibal teased, leaning in to give Will a soft, sweet kiss. Will’s mouth pursed, but there was delight floating in every word when he whispered, “Perhaps we could take a later train...”

Hannibal grinned, thoroughly pleased, and pulled Will into his arms.

The Lord Clarges ended up taking the train the next morning, distracted as they were and somewhat reluctant to impede their growing happiness with their duties and familial obligations. But it was a happy homecoming nonetheless, riding up together to Hartford House with Berger trailing behind and Winston seated as comfortably as could be managed across Will’s lap.

Even without warning to prepare them, the staff made a show of unity, turning out from their duties to welcome them home, beaming and delighted to have their young Lords back in their care.

“I don’t recognize those two men,” Will remarked, easing Winston down to one of the footmen who approached to take their horses and the valises.

“Those must be the detectives,” Hannibal surmised, swinging down with his usual supple grace to admire his mate in the late morning light. “I already regret our hasty return.”
“Is it terrible to admit that I do, too?” Will said with a note of longing, but he dismounted as well and straightened his clothes, surprised that his sister had not come. “Is Lady Rathmore not here?”

“She is, my Lord,” the footman said, taking the reins from him in exchange for Winston’s leash. “I believe she is in with His Grace.”

“And Mr. Dolarhyde?” Hannibal inquired, a quick scan revealing no trace of the large Alpha’s presence.

“Gone, my Lord,” the footman said, lingering to answer his questions. “He returned to Lady Rathmore and left straightaway, bags and all.”

Will exchanged a look with Hannibal, then nodded at the footman in dismissal, murmuring, “Thank you.”

“Welcome home, my Lords! I know I speak for us all when I say we are very happy to have you back home where we can care for you properly,” Mr. Hawkes said, beaming at them, as pleased as if he’d set eyes on his own children after a long absence. “Your rooms are freshly prepared and everything has been taken care of that you requested, my Lord!”

“Requested?” Will asked, angling a curious look at Hannibal which his husband promptly pretended not to notice.

“Yes, thank you, Hawkes,” Hannibal said, a pointed glare closing the subject. “And how are preparations coming for Grandfather’s gathering?”

“Oh, we are managing, my Lord,” Mrs. Henderson said, adding with a sweet smile that was rather intimidating, “all our help notwithstanding.”

Will heaved an inward sigh, reckoning that Mina had made herself a nuisance in his absence. He doffed his hat and gloves as they moved inside, handing them off to Mr. Hawkes.

The scents of home filled Will’s lungs—the Duke’s Alpha perfume of old books, the dry scent of antiques, the lemon balm polish Mrs. Henderson was so fond of, the indefinable essence that meant he was back in the house that had sheltered him for so many long and lonely years.

Hannibal’s scent joined the bouquet and Will smiled, reminded that he no longer had to be lonely, that he would always have a home here at Hartford House and in his husband’s heart.

“I see we have a new addition!” Mrs. Henderson said, her pleasant voice interrupting his absent musings. She smiled down at Winston, who yipped as Will released his lead.

“Yes, this is Winston,” Hannibal said, leaning down to pat Winston’s head, which reassured the uncertain dog and brought his tail back to vigorous wagging. “We acquired him in town under somewhat unusual circumstances.”

“His Grace did mention a certain incident in the Capital,” Mr. Hawkes said, and leaned down to peer at Winston before he told him, “That was very brave of you, Winston.”

He straightened, asking Will with somber seriousness, “Is there anything we might provide him, my Lord? His Grace did ask us to provide a suitable basket in your suite, but if there is anything we may do?”

“No, thank you, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, warmed to have Winston’s comfort inquired after, but such was the way of the Hartford staff. No stone was ever left unturned in the matter of their charges’ well being. “Only a bowl when we take our meals so that his Lordship does not stuff him full of pastries.”

Hannibal grinned but didn’t deny it, and patted his thigh to bring Winston close in unabashed affection.

“It is so lovely to be home and no longer idle,” Will said, smiling at the butler and housekeeper in turn, wishing he could frankly admit what a relief it was to be in their care once more. “I will come to your office presently, Mrs. Henderson, to discuss the event details. Only, please do send some tea to my sitting room for now. I need to speak with my sister and we both will need the fortification, no doubt.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“And my Lord, several applicants for the estate manager position have taken rooms in Hartford,” Mr. Hawkes said, the other servants dispersing to their duties now that their Lords were being settled in. “If you should like to set up meetings?”

“I can take care of that,” Hannibal offered, wrinkling his nose a little. “Must you set upon us at the door, Hawkes?”

“Honestly, Hannibal,” Will said, his smile wry. “Thank you, Mr. Hawkes, and you as well, Mrs. Henderson, for your warm welcome. I expect there is quite a lot of work to catch up on and now we are home to tend to it. I appreciate all of your hard work and believe me when I say I understand the particular pressures our guest brings.”
That garnered smiles all around, and Hannibal took Will’s arms in the short ceasefire, saying, “Grandfather will be eager to see us, let’s don’t keep him waiting. Mr. Hawkes, if you could send tea to the study for me? And bring the applicant packets, if they’ve arrived.”

“Very good, my Lord. His Grace is in his suite with Lady Rathmore, my Lord.”

Hannibal looped Will’s arm through his, heaving a weary sigh as they moved through the House with Winston at their heels. “Ah, but to be back at Marsham Heath.”

“Yes, how I long for the days when we were finding bodies in the woods,” Will said, tipping a wry glance at Hannibal, who chuckled, amused. “Things were so much more lighthearted then.”

“Things are certainly never boring when you’re involved,” Hannibal praised. He drew to a stop before Grandfather’s door and brought Will’s hand to his lips for a kiss. “Will... Before we immerse ourselves in our duties, I want you to know how grateful I am to you.”

Will cocked his head, about to make light of his statement, but thinking better of it when he saw how serious Hannibal was. The bond grew heavy with the weight of his feelings, but not a single one of them was concerning. Hannibal was happy and hopeful and content, and Will smiled to know it.

“You have given me a gift I never dreamed could be given, and offered an understanding I always thought was beyond my reach, and I thank you for that,” Hannibal said, kissing his fingertips in turn. “When you do make your decision formally, I will be the happiest man in the world should you still find in my favor. If you decide otherwise, just know that it will never change my feelings for you. I do love you to distraction, Will Lecter-Graham.”

“Hannibal—”

Will cut off as the door opened and his sister uttered a shocked little screech, making the two of them pull apart in haste.

“Goodness!” Mina cried, hand pressed to her bosom, her blue eyes wide and flicking from Will to Hannibal. “You frightened me half to death, lurking outside of the door! Why did no one send for us? I had no idea you’d returned! Ah, but welcome! Welcome home!”

Will couldn’t resist smiling when his hands were seized in his sister’s firm grasp, her beautiful smile without any shadow of pain or heartache, her blue eyes alight with excitement. She hugged his hands to her heart, as if overjoyed by the mere sight of him.


“Yes, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, spying him wheeling his chair towards the door as Mina stepped back to open it wider. “We have finally come home at last.”

He put his arm around Will’s back, warm and secure, both of them relieved and delighted to have returned safely to their family’s embrace once more.

Chapter 40

There were tears in Grandfather’s eyes as he reached for Will’s hand, extending his other to Hannibal. His long fingers shook, a tremor that had increased since they had last seen him and caused Hannibal to worriedly ask, “Have you been unwell, Grandfather?”

“No, no, no, it is only the excitement of seeing you both safe and sound,” he insisted, squeezing Hannibal’s hand and kissing Will’s while Mina looked on. “I am not as resilient as I once was.”

“Well, excitement or not, I’ll have a look at your medications,” Hannibal said, concerned to find his grandfather so drawn. He seemed to have aged years in their short absence, his grip weaker and his stamina lessened.

“That will be just fine, Hannibal,” Grandfather said, delighted with any suggestion they might make. “Ah! And this must be Winston! Hannibal has written to me about you. I hope we can always rely on him to keep you out of trouble, Will, hm?”

“Not my finest moment,” Will admitted, squeezing Grandfather’s hand and uttering an embarrassed laugh. “But he has made a wonderful addition to the family.”
“Well, not precisely the addition I had my heart set on,” Grandfather said, lifting Will's hand to his lips again, this time with a surreptitious brush of his nose against Will's wrist. The subtle change in Will's scent brought a pleased grin to his lips and he added, “but soon, perhaps?”

“That's quite enough of that, you old goat,” Hannibal scolded, amused.

“Hannibal, dear,” Mina said, politely appalled by him. “Heavens, such language! I am very happy to see you home, so I will not hold it against you, but you mustn't speak so in front of His Grace, surely!”

“It is quite alright, my dear,” Grandfather said, giving her an expansive smile. “I am used to my grandson’s manners!”

“You should be, as I learned from you,” Hannibal said, releasing Grandfather's hand to give Mina a tight smile. “I trust you have been taking excellent care of him?”

She held her hand out to him in expectation, her lashes fluttering over her upturned eyes.

He only took it when Will cleared his throat, his eyebrows beginning to disapprove.

“You look absolutely lovely, Lady Rathmore,” Hannibal told her, kissing her hand as bidden and releasing her just after. “I see time in the country agrees with you.”

“No less than time in the Capital agrees with my brother,” she said, her assessing blue eyes searching Will, who blushed brilliantly when she added, “the papers have been quite entertaining of late!”

“Oh, Hannibal pays no mind to that sort of thing,” Will said, his smile wry.

“Nor should he,” Grandfather said, and turned to Mina to ask, “If I might have a moment in private with my children, dear?”

Mina's brow furrowed in a frown so similar to Will's that it gave Hannibal goosebumps. Before she could find a suitable way to protest her dismissal, however, Will came to the rescue by saying, “I should love to have a quiet talk with you, Mina, if you have time? I've asked Mrs. Henderson to take tea up to my sitting room. Perhaps you could wait for me there?”

“Oh, yes, darling, of course!” she said, her spirits instantly rebounding. “I have just the thing! A very lovely tea, as His Grace can tell you! I will see that it is prepared. Heaven knows Mrs. Henderson has her hands full just now!”

She excused herself with a deep, lovely curtsy to Grandfather, who nodded his approval, and took herself off to tend to Will's request.

“She's certainly in fine form,” Hannibal said, still somewhat taken aback to have been scolded. “Correcting me in my own house!”

“She has a tendency to protect my dignity even when she needn't do so,” Grandfather said, tugging his lap blanket up closer around him, a slight shiver wracking his frame. “I beg your pardon, Will. She is a delightful and intelligent young lady who is entirely determined to embed herself in my side.”

Will laughed, a husky, raspy sound of rare true mirth that made Hannibal smile. “She is every bit as stubborn as I am, Grandfather.”

“Here, come sit,” Grandfather insisted, wheeling his chair towards the settee with a wave that they should occupy it.

“Jimmy said you had gone back to the Capital and I worried something must have happened to one or both of you.”

“Oh, just this business with Miss Hobbs,” Hannibal said, settling Will before sitting next to him. He gathered his hand up without being aware of it, resting their laced fingers against his thigh. “Will correctly surmised that I needed a wiser head than my own and returned to rescue me from an impulsive and regrettable decision.”

“Impulsive? You?” Grandfather asked, shaggy brows lifting in amusement. “I take it things didn't work in your favor?”

“We have come to the conclusion that she might not return to Hartford as we'd hoped,” Will said, amused by Roland's good humor. “The Lord Chancellor suggested she sue for emancipation instead.”

“I am sorry to hear that, as it must disappoint you both,” Grandfather said, his smile fading to a thoughtful frown. “The Fosters were so hoping to meet her.”

“She would like to meet them, as well,” Will said. “Perhaps, should everything happen without incident, we could arrange for them to meet here at Hartford and go from there?”

“I have no argument with that,” Grandfather said, waving his hand in dismissal that made Hannibal frown, though he knew well enough that Melinda's daughter had never been at the top of his grandfather's list of priorities.
“Tell me, Grandfather, what news have you in the investigation?” Hannibal asked instead, changing the subject. He and Grandfather would never see eye to eye on the subject of Melinda, he knew, and it was best to let it rest.

“There is excessively little, I’m afraid,” Roland said, his weighty gaze landing on Will, who looked back at him with his usual calm. “Zeller has been unable to find Mr. Brown, which I can only assume is because his family is sheltering him, but the detectives searched the livery and turned up a trunk with your cut girth strap.”

“A cut girth strap,” Will softly corrected, cocking his head. “Why on earth would he save it, if he thought it might implicate him?”

“A trophy, perhaps?” Hannibal offered, but failed to sound convinced.

“Grandfather, Matthew Brown has no reason at all to harm me, or he would have done so in the last six years,” Will insisted, “Nor has he any reason to discredit Hannibal.”

“There was a note inside the trunk as well,” Grandfather said, solemn. “Mr. Brown confirmed it to be Matthew’s handwriting, Will. It detailed his intentions to make the harm appear as if it was Hannibal’s doing. There was a hope that by doing so he would keep Hannibal from returning to burden you with his presence.”

Will shook his head, an absent gesture as his thoughts ran wild, saying with mute shock, “That is entirely foolish!”

“No one would keep such obvious evidence in hand, surely,” Hannibal said, finding it about as likely as Will did, which was not at all. “And why on earth would Matthew Brown wish for my absence? How would such possibly affect him?”

“The detectives have the note; they can show it to you both,” Roland said, troubled. “But the general understanding is that he feared you would drive Hartford House into the ground and undo all of Will’s work, and that in doing so you would ruin the livelihood of those in Hartford Town. It would seem Matthew formed something of an attachment to Will in the six years of their acquaintance, despite thinking him a beta male.”

_That_ brought Will’s head up, his attention focusing sharply.

“Was it stated so in the note?” he asked, and Roland nodded. “Grandfather, Matthew has _always_ known I am Omegan. He said as much to me the last time we spoke.”

Hannibal’s frown deepened, matching Grandfather’s own.

“Someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to make us focus on Matthew Brown,” he said, echoing Will’s sentiments. “To the point where Matthew has fled, no doubt from fear of our believing it. Whoever they are, they were able to forge his handwriting well enough to convince his own father. Perhaps we should be looking at those who knew him well enough to do so?”

Grandfather scowled, rubbing his forehead with a trembling hand. “I admit I’ve had my doubts, having known him for so long, but I am so desperate to ensure your safety, Will.”

“I know you are,” Will said, his hand tightening on Hannibal’s, both of them concerned by Roland’s frailty. “And I think for now we can rest easy knowing that they will try nothing more.”

Hannibal angled a look down at him, curious, but realization dawned.

“Having their scapegoat means that they do not intend to try again, lest they risk turning the attention from Matthew to themselves,” he murmured, getting a small nod from Will. “Whatever they were hoping to accomplish by harming you, they have changed tactics.”

“Which means I am even more at a loss as to their purpose,” Will said, grateful when Hannibal’s hand slipped from his to rest on his nape, giving him a comforting squeeze.

“Regardless as to whether they want to harm you or not,” Roland said, rallying, “I have kept the two detectives on payroll and they are to accompany you as your guards.”

“Grandfather—”

“No, Will, I insist on it,” he said, holding up his hand to still him. “Give a weary old man some peace, I beg of you. I could not survive the loss of more children.”

“Grandfather,” Hannibal said, holding his amber gaze. “You will not lose us. Will is never unarmed and I would gleefully destroy anything or anyone who tried to harm him.”

Roland smiled, some measure of his unease vanishing with Hannibal’s declaration.

“That isn’t something I ever dreamed I would hear out of you, Hannibal,” he whispered.
“I think he surprises himself more than he ever surprises us,” Will said, his hand curling over Hannibal’s knee as he cast a wry look at his husband. He looked back at Roland, then, adding without any doubt coloring his voice, “Hannibal will ensure that I am safe, Grandfather, but I am certain that whatever they were about, they will not try again. I cannot explain how I know it, only that I do.”

“He’s right, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, supporting Will’s stance. “As odd as it seems, it does make sense, all things considered. And on the off-chance that Will is wrong, I will be here to protect him.”

Roland’s eyes filled with unabashed delight as he looked at his grandchildren seated before him, every nuance of their body language speaking to a deepening regard that only confirmed what he’d found in their respective scents.

“When Matthew is found, I want to speak to him directly,” Will added, noting Roland’s sudden softening. “He might be more than a convenience to displace these events onto. He may know something more about what is happening and they are seeking to silence him.”

“It is very possible,” Hannibal mused, thinking back to the night Will had been pushed down the stairs. “Matthew is an Alpha, yet there was no trace of Alpha scent on the stairs the night you were pushed. Unless the accident with your mare and the accident with the stairs are entirely unrelated, of course.”

“One crisis at a time,” Will warned, the fine hairs on his nape lifting in response to the warm squeeze of Hannibal’s hand. “I will leave you gentlemen to speak in private, however. If I keep my sister waiting, she may feel compelled to come fetch me.”

He slid out of Hannibal’s grip and rose, moving to clasp Grandfather’s hand in both of his. He kissed the ring Roland always wore and pressed his cheek to his knuckles in a moment of soft affection that surprised the old Alpha.

“I am so very glad to be home again, Grandfather,” he said, lowering Roland’s hand with care not to hurt him, “and so very glad to see you.”

“My dear, the joy is entirely mine,” Roland told him, watching Will and Winston quit the room with a soft smile on his face.

“He knows, by the way,” Hannibal said, stretching out on the settee with his arms along the back, one booted ankle crossed onto his opposite knee.

“Hm?” Roland asked, turning his attention to his grandson with difficulty, the specters of his youth more demanding these days than the attentions of the living.

“Aunt Margaret tattled on you, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, grinning at the sudden cagey expression that fell over Roland’s face. “I guess Bedelia takes after her, doesn’t she? She took herself all the way to Marsham Heath to give Will and I some very interesting information regarding you and Charles.”

“There is nothing in the world interesting about me, you brat!” Roland countered, wagging a finger at him in reproach. “Mind yourself or I’ll have Lady Rathmore in to scold you!”

Hannibal shuddered, much to Roland’s amusement.

“Now, I have some information for you, Hannibal,” Roland said, back to business as he wheeled his chair over to his desk. “I will leave it to your discretion what you do and do not tell your husband.”

“Keeping secrets from Will is detrimental to my health, not to mention my happiness,” Hannibal warned, pushing to his feet to join his grandfather at his desk, where Roland was shuffling papers out of a locked drawer. “What on earth have you been up to?”

“Financial papers,” Roland said, lifting stacks of papers free. “Investment schemes, a list of creditors—Mr. Buddish has spent an inordinate amount of time helping you recently, so I have had to rely on his assistant, but here we have it.”

Hannibal skimmed the papers, eyes widening to see an expanded version of what he’d been provided at Marsham Heath.

“I knew the Rathmores were in some dire straits, but this,” he said, eyes narrowing, “this is even more shocking.”

“I found I was curious how he has maintained his lifestyle,” Roland said, shuffling the papers, “not to mention keeping Mina in the luxury she is accustomed to. Here, look here.”

Hannibal took the note up, quickly realizing that Timothy had been doing business under his mother’s maiden name. “Who on earth provided him with this sum?” he asked, searching the paper to the bottom to find the creditor. It was a Capital-based agent, but the name gave him pause.
“I had that man looked into,” Grandfather said, offering another paper. “Hannibal, that little scoundrel is taking money from a foreign government. We could never convince a court with this, but you know as well as I do who Timothy St. Martin is, hm?”

“Do you think he is selling our military out?” Hannibal asked, anger banking in his belly, slow and steady.

“I think it is rather an unusual coincidence that such a large sum was given for ‘services rendered’ just before Ostham fell.”

“And then Lord Rathmore encouraged our military to lay siege,” Hannibal murmured, scowling. “It is no wonder he’s opposed to any treaties! He has everything to gain from the war continuing on! This is treason!”

“This,” Grandfather said, tapping the papers, “is conjecture, Hannibal. Without proof, we can do nothing more than what I have already done, which is send the information to the Courts and ask them to investigate the matter.”

“What a vile little beast,” Hannibal said, outraged than any son of this country’s soil would use Her so badly and with such vicious intent. “Yet from the looks of things, he is only racking up more debt rather than paying it off. He must be desperate by now.”

Roland reached back into the drawer, pulling loose a folded note initialed by Zeller.

“Since our discussion before you left, I worried that Mr. Verger might have some hand in what happened to Will,” he said, unfolding the note to smooth it, revealing a list of names. “This is a list of Mr. Verger’s visitors since his incarceration. I ran Zeller nearly ragged identifying them all, the lazy brat, but this man is in Lord Rathmore’s employ.”

Hannibal peered at the name, no wiser for having seen it but still concerned that there was a link between Will’s in-laws and the Vergers.

“Have you found any reason for the visit?” Hannibal asked, deeply disturbed by the connection.

“Not as yet,” Roland admitted, weary. “But I have asked for copies of the correspondence log. It will take some time, as certain parties had to be convinced of my need for it, but it should arrive sooner rather than later.”

“Please be sure to show me when it does,” Hannibal said, absently rubbing his forehead. “This is terribly worrisome. Have you any suspicion that Mina knows what Rathmore has been about?”

“None whatsoever,” Roland told him, carefully stacking the papers together. “In our various discussions, it sounds as if Lady Rathmore has little contact with either her husband or her household. Before she arrived here at Hartford, she was with one of her sisters in the Capital, where she had been for nearly six months’ time.”

“Does she correspond?”

“She sends letters every morning,” Roland said, shrugging his bowed shoulders. “But they are always addressed to various ladies of her acquaintance or to shopkeepers in the Capital. She is, to all observable purposes, entirely ignorant of her husband’s machinations.”

Hannibal heaved a sigh, sliding his hand down over his face and nodding. “Good. It would break Will’s heart if she were to be involved in anything to his detriment. She is the only member of his family who even pretends to love him; I would save him from losing that, if I could.”

“Mind you, I am not saying she is entirely innocent, nor pleasant, but despite being unbearably spoiled and self-centered, I have no reason to complain of her conduct,” Roland said, somber. “I blame her father for the way he raised her, and her own personality for being so indulgent in herself, but she has no malice that I can measure outside of what jealousy can rouse in a person’s heart. Because she is wildly jealous of Will, Hannibal.”

Hannibal cocked his head, somewhat taken aback by the steady stare he got in return.

“She threw him into your clutches to save herself and finds the reward for her selfishness is an abysmal marriage to a licentious fool,” Roland said, stern in his rebuke of Lord Rathmore. “He spends every cent they have on his own pleasures and garners unpleasant gossip everywhere he goes. Mina has done herself no favors with her actions and she knows it.”

“Good,” Hannibal said, unwilling to be gracious with her. “I am delighted she is stewing in her own jealousy. I hope the remainder of the time she spends here—as short as I can make it, considering what the Capital is saying regarding my relationship with her—simply boils her in her own regrets.”

“Yet, if she had not acted so selfishly, you would never have been married to Will,” Roland reminded him, flummoxing his grandson for a moment. “You would have married Mina... and I do not think I speak out of turn when I say that you would be far less happy today had you done so.”
“You aren’t wrong about that,” Hannibal admitted, smiling as Will’s beloved face turned to his in his mind’s eye. “Will is an excellent fisherman, Grandfather. I am well and truly and happily snared by him and he knows it.”

Roland chortled, pleased and unafraid to show it. “Don’t flatter yourself, Hannibal! A wonderful Omega like Will would hardly have to exert himself! Flung yourself onto his hook is more like it, I’m sure!”

“Gloat all you like,” Hannibal offered, expansive in his invitation and smiling at his Grandfather’s obvious joy. “It all played out as you hoped for, you old romantic. The bloodlines you dreamed of merging are well on their way, or so I hope.”

Roland’s eyes widened. He pressed his fingertips to his mouth in surprise before he whispered, “Will’s heat?”

“I am not discussing it with you,” Hannibal warned, cocking his head. “It’s enough for you to know that we came through it together with a better understanding of our place with each other. I should like to have that cottage in the woods torn down, by the way, as he assured me he will no longer be spending such times alone there.”

Grandfather grinned, lifting his eyes to the heavens in silent thanks that brought a chuckle from his grandson.

“Now, let’s have a look at what you’ve been taking recently, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, helping him put the paperwork back for now and quietly ordering what he had learned so that he could later inform his mate.

The tea service was just being carried in by Mina’s maid, Miss Speck, when Will reached his sitting room. He could hear his sister’s voice raised in firm instruction, the haughty tone bringing an indulgent smile to his lips.

He let himself in as Miss Speck settled the tray, his smile widening to a grin when Mina yipped in alarm at Winston’s excited barking.

“Oh! Heavens! Will!”

“It’s fine, Mina, he’s just excited,” Will said, chuckling as patted his thigh, bringing Winston to his side in a bounding flurry of high spirits.

“Truly?” she asked, dubious but trusting him.

“Yes, Mina, I promise,” Will said, and said to Miss Speck, “Might you ask one of the footmen to take him for a walk, please?”

“Yes, m’Lord,” she said, giving him a small bob of her head. There was no hesitation in her when she called Winston to her, and she seemed happy enough to take him with her.

“Ah, my love,” Mina sighed, and crossed the room to take his hands. Her eyes flicked over his face as if searching for a secret and she said with an air of question, “You look positively radiant, Will.”

“And you look very lovely, Mina,” Will said, delighted to see her so at ease and comfortable. “Shall we sit?”

“Oh! Indeed!” she said, moving to settle on the settee. She patted the space next to her and told him, “I will pour for us, shall I?”

“Thank you,” Will said, moving to settle at her side.

“This,” Mina said, pouring a full cup for them both, “is a special blend of tea, Will. It purges the blood of impurities and encourages good spirits. I ordered it especially for you, my dear, as I feared you would be quite undone on your return.”

“Undone?” Will asked, taking his cup up to give the contents a slight sniff. “In what way, Mina?”

“Oh, only in that I feared for your safety alone with that man,” she said, troubled. “How I fretted day and night over you, Will! I was not entirely certain you would return home.”

“Oh, Mina,” Will sighed, shaking his head. “Hannibal would never harm me, especially not now.”

Her blue eyes narrowed, a flash of irritation showing in their depths before it vanished so quickly that Will wasn’t sure he’d seen it at all. He took a polite sip of his tea to distract himself, and when Mina asked, he answered with a slight nod, “It is rather stronger than I prefer, and somewhat bitter, but I am sure it will grow on me.”

“Indeed it shall,” Mina said, smiling at him. “It is good to see you so well, darling. You look different somehow.”

“I feel different,” Will admitted, settling his cup back into its saucer with a grimace. “I feel... happy, Mina.”

“Oh, my darling, that is wonderful news,” she said, putting her cup down to take his hands. “You must tell me everything! It’s been so long since we could visit and I have missed you so!”
“Of course,” Will assured her, a slight frown bowing his mouth. “Mina, forgive me, but why did you not write to me regarding Mr. Dolarhyde?”

“Why, what do you mean, Will?” she asked, confusion filling her lovely face. “I did write to you, darling. The first moment I was able! When he arrived with your letter, I was so surprised! I certainly never expected to see him alone.”

“I never received any communication from you,” Will said, the tension easing from Will’s shoulders, some small suspicion laid partially to rest with her words. It worried him that the letter had gone astray, but it was not entirely unheard of for mail to go missing.

“That is rather strange,” she said, her brow wrinkling in a familiar frown. “I took myself straight upstairs and wrote you immediately, darling, to assure you that I was not harmed by him!”

“You believe that he was responsible for those deaths?” Will asked, his stomach sinking with upset.

“I was shocked, Will! Simply shocked to read what you had written me!” she said, roses blooming in her cheeks with her agitation. “Two men dead and Francis pretending to be about my business?”

“So he was not,” Will said, another thread of suspicion unwinding. He strained to read Mina but it was difficult for him and always had been. When Mina lied, she believed it as solid truth, and lacked any sign of dissembling.

“Darling, no,” Mina breathed, properly aghast. Her hands were cold on his, her buffed nails sharp even pressed so lightly to his skin. “I have no idea why he was in the Capital! But goodness, such horror! Two men killed and flung into the river? I was terrified!”

“You did send him away, then?” Will pressed, searching her face.

“Naturally!” Mina said, her fingers tightening on his. “I was nearly in a faint, Will! I am not used to that sort of thing, you know! I was terrified and sent him packing immediately.”

Will cocked his head, turning his hands in hers to clasp them, chafing her fingers to bring warmth to the surface.

“The letter was unopened when he arrived?” he asked. “It hadn’t been tampered with?”

“Heavens, no,” Mina assured him. “Francis knows that is a sure way to earn a dismissal! I’m certain he was hoping that whatever you’d written I would excuse or condone somehow. Having been betrayed by you, he put his faith in me.”

Will flinched at that assessment, thinking of Francis as he’d last seen him—incredulous and torn and deeply unhappy. It pained him to think of it as a betrayal. Whatever his failings or imperfections, Francis had only ever wanted to protect him, and it soured Will's stomach to think he had repaid him with treachery.

“I couldn’t bear to keep him near me, Will,” she whispered, a plea in her voice as if she begged his understanding. “I realize there is no proof that he had anything to do with it, but that he might have done so... it quite chilled me. He has always been so gentle and quiet. It is difficult for me to think that he is capable of such terrible violence, but I erred on the side of sense and sent him off to Town to take a room, as you requested.”

There was a small silence as she gathered her thoughts, a subtle, mulish set to her mouth warning Will that he had given her offense.

“And I am greatly disturbed, Will, that you think some business of mine would require such secrecy that men should be killed for it!” she said, sliding her hands free to take up her teacup again, covering her upset with a tiny sip.

“Mina, I did not mean to imply that you were involved in something unsavory,” Will told her, still plagued by doubts on that count. “I only meant to assure you that no matter what troubles you, I will support you and help you through it. I have heard some very disturbing things in regards to the Rathmore fortunes. I was concerned that the family had been involved in some scheme to reverse a run of bad investments.”

Her face smoothed into an expressionless mask, but he could see the thoughts spinning behind her blue eyes.

“That is absurd,” she said, lowering her cup to freshen his tea for him, turning Will's handle towards him with care. “There isn't a thing wrong with our fortunes, dearest.”

Will held his tongue, thinking it very likely that Timothy would keep such things from Mina, who professed a lack of understanding with numbers which Will knew was entirely contrary to the truth of her keen, sharp mind. Mina, however, had always masked her intelligence, unwilling to be burdened by the responsibilities it brought to bear.
“I ran into Timothy yesterday,” Will said, startled when she nearly dropped her cup. “Mina? You've gone quite pale! Are you unwell?”

“No, silly, I just didn't expect you to say such a thing,” she said, her laugh breathless and uncomfortable. Her hand trembled when she put her cup down and plucked up a folded napkin to wipe the tea from her fingers. “I didn’t imagine the two of you would cross paths, darling, that is all.”

“The Capital is a rather large place,” Will conceded. “He mentioned something about your practicing at something?” There was a fleeting flicker of panic in her blue eyes that she quickly averted her gaze to hide.

“Oh, that,” she said, uttering a breathless laugh. “He was probably teasing about my acquaintance. He is an actor and Timothy dislikes him immensely. But tell me, darling, where on earth did you run into my husband?”

“I was leaving the tailors as he was coming in,” Will said, taking another sip of the bitter tea and putting it down with a wrinkle of his nose. The tea made him slightly queasy and he sincerely hoped she would not insist on sharing it very often. “We did not speak for long, but it was long enough for me to understand why you might wish to remain here at Hartford with us for a little longer, Mina.”

Her blue eyes rose to his, wide and hopeful. “Truly, Will?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling when she did. “I will not trouble you with our exchange, but he is an altogether unpleasant man and his regard for you was certainly not what I would wish for.”

He considered mentioning how Timothy had mistaken them for one another, but changed his mind. It would break his heart should Hannibal ever mistake Mina for himself, and as little as Mina professed to care for Timothy, he was the man she had chosen to marry and there were feelings behind that decision, he knew.

“I should like you to remain here at Hartford through Grandfather's gathering,” Will decided. “Write to Timothy and tell him so. I cannot extend the invitation indefinitely, as there are some troubling rumors that have started, but we will do what we can. Perhaps when you leave here, you might go to the seaside? Or to visit Father?”

“Yes, darling, that would be lovely!” Mina said, her relief so vast that Will’s heart ached for her. “But what rumors, my dear? I have been here in the country for ages, now, and I am bereft of any gossip!”

“That is not a bad thing, is it?” Will teased, earning himself a playful swat of her hand. “Hannibal and I attended a Masquerade, the annual charity ball for the Ministry of War, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh, yes, I read about it in the papers!” she gasped, hand flying to her chest. “Will! What scandalous behavior! Father was no doubt frothing to read of it! Were you truly carrying on with Prince Bert? Honestly, Will, I never would’ve expected such behavior from you! Timothy wrote to say he would not attend. I should have come if only to keep you from such disgraceful folly! And your husband, was he furious? He is always so expressionless and cold, I can never tell what is going on in that mind of his!”

“Mina, no, no,” Will said, laughing and shaking his head. “Nothing of the sort happened! You know how those columns are! But there was a misunderstanding at first that I was you.”

“Me,” she said, sounding mildly offended, her nose wrinkling in a mirror of Will’s own expression.

“Yes, there was a rumor that Hannibal had taken you as his mistress and brought you to the ball right under your husband's nose,” Will said, one eyebrow arching over his eye. Mina gaped at him, equally horrified and amused. “They thought you had cut your hair.”

“As if I would ever do such a ghastly thing!” she squeaked.

“Cut your hair or bed my husband?” Will inquired, chuckling when she covered her mouth to stifle appalled laughter.

“Will! Shame on you!” she said, but scooted closer, as if there were listening ears who might overhear them. “But you must tell me everything! What has happened to make you so happy? It surely cannot be that man, old horror that he is!”

“It is that man, actually,” Will said, a fond smile curving his mouth when he thought of Hannibal.

“Tell me,” Mina urged, and prodded him with her beringed finger when he only smiled. “Tell me, Will! I want to know everything! Confide in me! I have no excitement, wasting away out here in the country while you adventure in the Capital! Tell me what has happened.”

“Well,” Will said, heaving an exaggerated sigh. “Very well, Mina, if you insist.”

A cat-like smile curved her full mouth when she purred, “I do.”
Between making arrangements for Mr. Dolarhyde, per Will's request, scheduling interview times for the land agents, and attending to the correspondence that had built up at Hartford, Hannibal found the entire day had gotten away from him without seeing Will even once. He didn't like it one bit, but looked forward to dinner with his mate and hurried upstairs when Berger came down to remind him.

“Where is Will?” he asked, sighing with relief to tug his neckerchief free and shrug his jacket off.

“I believe he is still in with Mrs. Henderson, m’Lord,” Berger said, divesting him of his waistcoat. He fished Hannibal’s watch out with care to lay it on his vanity along with his cuff links.

“He hasn't seen the bathtub yet?” Hannibal asked, grinning when Berger shook his head.

“No, my Lord,” Berger said, doing his best to remain serious. “Price is in raptures over the dressing room, though. I took a peek myself, m’Lord, and they did an excellent job, though it looks a bit empty.”

“Not for long,” Hannibal said, pleased. He sat down and tugged his boots off, shedding the rest of his clothes with absent grace before shrugging on his robe. “He got a final fitting for that wardrobe I ordered him; I imagine it will be on its way any day now.”

“I'll be sure to know ahead of time,” Berger said, heading into the washroom to start the bath, “so I can find a place to hide until the dust settles.”

Hannibal chuckled, but he didn’t deny it. Will’s propensity for violence remained a source of unadulterated enjoyment for him.

“You’ll be having some guests tonight,” Berger mentioned, laying out bathing sheets and tidying as he went. “His Grace had already settled his plans, I’m told.”

“Who is it?” Hannibal asked, finding more letters neatly stacked on his desk. He glanced through them, only half listening to Berger’s reply.

“Lord du Maurier and his guest, m’Lord,” Berger said, emerging from the washroom when Hannibal said nothing. He spied his master looking through the letters and said, “Beg your pardon, Lord Clarges, those come in just this evening.”

Hannibal came to a weather-beaten envelope and felt a spike of anxiety when he saw that it was from the front.

“Is everything alright, m’Lord?” Berger asked, worried by his sudden stillness.

“It’s from Captain Rogers,” Hannibal said, frowning as he opened it. It was weeks old, from the looks of it, and had been rerouted through Galley Field before finding him here. “I had assumed he’d retired.”

“He did, m’Lord,” Berger supplied, nervously standing by for information. It would have been unseemly under other circumstances, but Hannibal knew his valet was anxious to know if something had happened. “But he returned about a year back, took up his old post.”

Hannibal scanned the letter, blunt and to the point, as Rogers himself was.

‘I don’t know if you’re aware of it, but recent actions have been taken regarding the soldiers. There’s a new council, the Council for the Betterment of Omegas, and it’s beginning to take its toll. This may come as a shock to you, Clarges, but there are Omegas in Their Majesties’ army. Most of my own company are Omegas and they are falling under heavy persecution. The Council, working in conjunction with the Ministry of War, has enacted stipulations on freight. The supply lines they use to obtain their needed medicines are drying up one by one and the situation is growing desperate.

‘I am fully aware of your feelings on the subject of Omegas, Lord Clarges, but I appeal to your oath as a physician. These soldiers are facing crisis and I have nowhere else to turn. I came back to duty to see if I could somehow assist my men, but this problem has grown teeth and is beyond my singular ability. As a Peer, your supplies can get through to us without argument. I beg of you to do what you can for their sakes, my Lord. They are brave soldiers, every one, and they are facing horrors I dare not imagine if they are exposed to the mercies of this Council…’

It echoed in his head, a reminder of the man he’d been until far too recently. That Rogers would even have to couch his request in an appeal to Hannibal’s oath to do no harm left him queasy, sickened to think of the monster he’d been to those he had never deigned to notice.

“M’Lord?” Berger asked, daring to intrude on his thoughts.
Hannibal handed him the letter, frowning and thoughtful, silent while Berger read it for himself.

“Heavens and gods preserve us,” Berger whispered, his hands trembling as he handed the letter back. “A council? Aren't there troubles and woes enough to concern them that they can leave decent and brave soldiers to their duties?”

“Apparently not,” Hannibal said, grim and pensive. He rubbed his forehead, a headache welling behind his eyes. “Gods, Berger, I doubt even my influence is enough to shut this Council down.”

“I'm shocked, my Lord,” Berger said, at an absolute loss. “How did these types gain such control?”

“They did it with stealth and patience,” Hannibal said, his voice dropping to a low growl, “beneath a veneer of public safety that kept the rest of us comfortable while they amassed their power.”

He shuddered, horrified by the implications. A council for such purpose would repress Omegas slowly, pretending to do what was best for everyone and protect the sanctity of their position, all the while stripping their choices from them.

“If they succeed with this,” he said, lifting the letter and giving it a small shake, “then they will turn their attention to Omegas here at home.”

“What can we do for it, my Lord?” Berger asked, his eyes liquid with anguish. “More to the point, what can you do for it? People like me and mine, we have no sort of power over anything. We have to rely on our Lords.”

“I know, Berger,” Hannibal said, rubbing a weary hand over his eyes. “I will think of something.”

He took the letter with him to the bath, sinking up to his shoulders in the blessedly hot water, reading the lines over and over in the hopes that he would be inspired with a way to sort the dismal mess that had been presented to him.

Will spent the afternoon with Mrs. Henderson finalizing the plans for the menu and decorations as well as the distribution of rooms to those who would stay with them. He approved more house staff, young men and women from the village whose families he knew well, some of whom he had watched grow from child to young adult in his time here at Hartford. He returned to his suite to clean up for dinner, looking forward to seeing Anthony for dinner and filled with a kind of quiet peace to be home, a beloved and important member of the Lecter household, just as he'd dreamed when he'd come here six years ago.

He heard movement in his suite as he entered and found Jimmy getting his things ready, moving in and out of the dressing room with a smile on his pleasant face.

“Good evening, my Lord!”

“Good evening, Jimmy,” Will said, absently rubbing his stomach, which had been strangely unsettled all day. “I'm sorry to have left you so suddenly on the road, I hope I didn't frighten you.”

“Oh, my Lord, the moment they told me you'd turned back, I knew you were in good hands,” Jimmy said, winking at him. He gestured at the dressing room, then, asking, “Have you seen what his Lordship managed while you were away?”

Will's brows rose and he smiled, unable to resist Jimmy's excited delight. He moved into his dressing room and gaped at the changes that had taken place. The room had been expanded by better than half, the original dressing room opening up into the former maid's room to create one large, tasteful dressing room. The wardrobe that Hannibal had purchased for him so long ago at Mr. Avery's shop barely took up any room at all, leading Will to laughingly ask, “What on earth did he do this for?”

“I could wager a guess,” Jimmy offered, beaming and pleased, “but I'd much rather wait and see, wouldn't you?”

Will laughed again, belly-deep and helpless, the sound echoing in the large space. His blue eyes roamed the details, his laughter fading to a soft smile as he thought of his husband and the loving intent behind such a gift. The bond was somewhat muted when he reached for it, something he did more often now, especially when moved by his affection for Hannibal. He found beneath his contentment was a strange concern, as if his husband dwelled on something that troubled him but was deliberately attempting to shield Will from it.

“Is his Lordship in his suite?” Will murmured, smoothing his hand over the panel that led to the passages, relieved it had not been disturbed.

“I believe he's soaking in the bath, my Lord,” Jimmy said, gathering up clean underthings for Will to change into. “Would you like Mr. Berger to hurry him?”

“No, thank you, Jimmy,” Will said, pushing away from the wall and heading towards the washroom. “I'll do it myself.”
He cracked the washroom door, peeking in to find his husband perusing a letter and worrying his lower lip with his sharp teeth. The unhappiness was a coal beneath the layer of his emotions, a kernel of dismay that Will reached for, countering its livid heat with calm. Hannibal looked up at him, catching his scent and startled by his silent arrival, but the pleasure he felt when laying eyes on Will was unfeigned.

“I was planning to scold you about the changes made to my suite,” Will told him, “but I changed my mind.”

“Oh,” Hannibal said, making a show of checking Will’s hands for coshing items. “May I ask why?”

“Just the sight of my husband up to his chin in the biggest bathtub I’ve ever laid eyes on,” Will said, closing the door behind him and leaning on it. Whatever it was that bothered Hannibal, his presence alone was enough to distract him from it, Will was relieved to know.

“I should have let you use it first, as it’s a gift for you,” Hannibal said, sitting up fully, the steaming water lapping at his chest. “Surprise?”

Will chuckled, moving around the washroom to have a look at the massive, claw-footed tub.

“What do you think?” Hannibal asked, shifting in a quiet ripple of hot water.

“About the dressing room or about the tub?” Will inquired, circling around to Hannibal’s side to sit on the lip of the tub.

He dipped his fingers into the water, a flush on his cheeks as he looked his fill at his husband’s athletic body.

“Both,” Hannibal said, leaning back to encourage Will’s lingering stare, the Alpha in him ever ready to display himself to advantage.

“I think I have a very generous husband to thank,” Will murmured, trailing his fingers through the water to brush Hannibal’s knee where it rested just beneath the surface. “And that luckily this tub is large enough for two.”

Hannibal grinned up at him and said, “I had just the same thought when I ordered it... should we try it? Just to make sure, of course.”

Will laughed, marking the letter laying on the tub-side tray and wondering if its contents could explain the strange unhappiness his husband was feeling. He reached for the buttons on his coat and said, “I think we’d better. Just to make sure.”

He made short work of undressing, his cheeks pinking up brilliantly beneath Hannibal’s sparkling amber gaze, but there was no shyness in him in the end. He slipped into the tub with the supple grace Hannibal always found so striking, settling into the cradle of Hannibal’s body to rest against his chest.

Hannibal wrapped both arms around him and poked his nose against Will’s throat on a deep inhale.

“I’ve missed you,” he sighed, nuzzling Will’s curls and hitching him up closer, both of them warm and relaxed in the deep tub.

“I can tell,” Will said, a small wriggle of his backside making his point. He turned on his side, twisting to rest one hand on Hannibal’s furry chest. His blue eyes were a pale, bluish-green in the strong lamplight, Hannibal noted, beautiful and glimmering behind the fan of his lashes. “Something is troubling you, Hannibal.”

He smiled, stroking his wet hand down Will’s cheek to his shoulder with a soft sigh.

“You can’t lie to me, remember?” Will murmured, leaning in to nuzzle his nose, a gentle gesture of affection that made Hannibal’s heart skip a beat.

“I received a letter from Captain Rogers,” Hannibal said, his deep voice reverberating in the tiled room. “The Omegas overseas are under fire from our own shores.”

Will shook his head, not understanding.

“There is a Council,” Hannibal said, stretching out one arm to snag the letter. It was smeared here and there from where he’d handled it with wet fingers, but still legible. He waited for Will to lean back against him and wipe his fingers dry before he handed it off. “They have begun closing all avenues these soldiers need to maintain a secret that is rightly theirs to keep.”

“The Council for the Betterment of Omegas,” Will read, nose wrinkling in distaste. He absently hooked his feet over Hannibal’s ankles, toes curling beneath his husband’s heels to anchor himself. Hannibal’s arms looped around his waist, warm and strong and comforting. “Do you have any idea who the members are?”

“No, but I intend to find out,” Hannibal said, reading it again over Will’s shoulder, his head leaning against his husband’s. Will put the letter aside with care, saying in a husky whisper, “What will you do?”
“Everything in my power,” Hannibal said, his arms tightening on Will in a spasm of pain, seeking comfort only his mate could offer. “I owe it to them, to all of the soldiers who died because they feared I would expose them. Ten years of it, Will. I cannot fail them now, not again.”

“Then let it fuel you,” Will urged, rubbing his hands over Hannibal’s beneath the water, smoothing his skin in gentle strokes. “Let it be the ember which will consume that awful Council in flames.”

“I will,” Hannibal said, nuzzling Will’s curls with his eyes closed, momentarily completed simply by his presence. “But that will take time and I must do something more immediate regarding their supplies.”

“Arranging shipments is a solution, though a temporary one at best,” Will pointed out, tipping his head a bit to press a soft kiss to Hannibal’s cheek. “The supply lines themselves need to be opened again. I can arrange a shipment of suppressants and scent blockers; Jimmy is very well acquainted with several suppliers in the Capital, but if they are keeping them from arriving, then it will do no good. Have you any contacts on the Continent that could accept and deliver it without the Council any wiser?”

“I shall have to confer with Mr. Buddish,” Hannibal said, considering it, “but I believe it can be arranged. It is, as you said, a temporary solution, but it will serve until I can manage to find a way to undermine that damned Council!”

Will smiled suddenly, his blue eyes crinkling in a way Hannibal found both distracting and absolutely adorable.

“What?” he asked, a mystified but pleased that he had somehow gratified his mate.

“Hannibal Lecter, Marquess of Clarges, legendary scourge of Omegas,” Will breathed, sprinkling the words with playful kisses, “absolutely incensed at the injustice done in the name of saving Omegas from themselves—I am elated to be a witness to your transformation.”

“Witness? Catalyst is more like it,” Hannibal said, jostling Will in his arms and curling around him. “Were it not for you, I might even myself be sitting on that ghastly Council, smug and secure in my hateful actions.”

“I wonder if my methods would work as well on them?” Will mused, pretending to consider it even as his husband began to glower. “A little wheedling, a trout or two, perhaps a glimpse of my knees?”

He grinned when Hannibal snarled, delving into his throat with mock fury to place a loving kiss on his mark.

“Oh, I do love you, Will,” he sighed, kissing the place again and just holding him, filled with wonder that his mate could so easily bring him from bleak worry to confident action in only a few moment’s time. “There is nothing in my power to give you that I would refuse.”

Will smiled, flustered but pleased, and eased around in the sloshing water to give his husband a tender, coaxing kiss.

There was an air of festivity in Hartford House that evening as they came down to the parlor The coach from Fernhill had arrived in their absence, delivering Anthony as well as his guest for their evening with Grandfather.

Will’s smile faltered when he saw the guest was Thomas Marlow, the man who had spoken to him so rudely at the Fernhill Garden Party.

“Ah! I finally get to meet you properly!” he said, beating a hasty path to Will’s presence to take his hand. He pressed a kiss to Will’s knuckles and said in low tones, “I beg you, beg you for your forgiveness, Lord Clarges! I had no right to speak to you in such a familiar way! Please, allow me to make clear my humblest and deepest apologies!”

“Steady on,” Hannibal warned, noting the way Will arched a single eyebrow, as if considering settling the matter with violence just to make his point. “One more word out of you in that vein and I’ll hand him your head on a platter, Thomas.”

“Ah, of course! Excuse me,” Mr. Marlow said, chagrined. He released Will’s hand with a shamed smile, as if Will had scolded him harshly. “I only want to convey how deeply sorry I am—”

“That you spoke so?” Will asked, cocking his head. “Or that I turned out to be the one you spoke of?”

“Hannibal! What on earth are you doing to Thomas?” Roland called, craning a suspicious look at them. “He looks like a hairy beet!”

“That’s just his face, Grandfather,” Anthony assured him, laughing at the glare Thomas gave him.

“Truly, Lord Clarges—”

“You are forgiven,” Will said, cutting Mr. Marlow off, impatient with any self-serving apology. “Please, think no more of it. If you are a friend of my husband’s, then I will strive to be your friend, as well.”
“Wonderful! Wonderful!” Thomas said, his delighted grin faltering somewhat beneath the weight of Hannibal’s disapproving stare.

“Not too good a friend, I expect,” Hannibal said, his displeasure heavy in his deep Alpha voice. “I admit I am surprised to see you, Thomas.”

“Thomas is staying in the country to keep me company,” Anthony said, moving to kiss Will’s hand in a familiar gesture of respect tinged with his usual playful lechery. “I’ve been inconsolable without you, Will.”

“Now, that is quite enough—”

“I’ve missed you, too, Anthony,” Will said, smirking at the look of purely indignant outrage Hannibal wore. “And so has Hannibal.”

“That is highly questionable,” Hannibal said, frowning. He puffed up like a bullfrog and glowered at his cousin. “I’m not so certain I have missed you, Anthony. Perhaps if you leave, I might find out?”

“Hannibal,” Will laughed, shaking his head, but their conversation was interrupted by Mina’s arrival.

She floated into the room like an emerald angel, her pink cheeks a becoming complement to the green of her gown, her hair carefully piled atop her head with ringlets teasing her soft cheeks. She looked, to Will’s eyes, an absolute vision of beauty, yet when he glanced at his husband to say so, he found Hannibal had eyes only for him.

“What?” he whispered, using the momentary privacy as Mina greeted the other gentlemen.

“Nothing,” Hannibal answered, his lips curving in a smirk. “I am only appreciating my beautiful spouse.”

Will grinned and purred, “You appreciated me rather thoroughly in the bath, Lord Clarges. Mind yourself, or shall I mention Aunt Margaret?”

“Aunt Margaret?” Anthony asked, catching the name. “She is still in the Capital, bless her. She mentioned she’d visited you all at Marsham Heath?”

“Bearing tales on Grandfather,” Hannibal said, his hand pressing to the base of Will’s spine.

“Ah! There is Mr. Hawkes, thank heaven,” Grandfather said, wheeling over to them with obvious relief to interrupt. “Shall we, children? Will, if I could escort you, my dear?”

“What on earth is he hiding?” Anthony asked, mystified, his dancing blue eyes on Roland and Will.

“Ask Aunt Margaret,” Hannibal suggested, offering his arm to Mina, who laced her own with his. He leveled a biting smile at Thomas and said, “I suppose you’ll have to escort my cousin, Thomas.”

“You make it sound so onerous,” Anthony scoffed, presenting his elbow to Thomas, who took it with a show of being put upon.

“Had Hannibal not returned, you could have escorted me, Lord du Maurier,” Mina said, fluttering her lashes at Anthony, her smile coy. “Perhaps another time?”

“Alas, there will be little chance of that,” Hannibal said, leading her into the dining room, “as I have every hope of remaining here at Hartford House.”

“Do you?” Anthony asked, pleased and surprised.

“Nonsense, of course he does!” Thomas said, laughing. “He’s talked of nothing else for six solid years! He even planned to—”

“Thomas,” Hannibal said, the note of warning quite enough to stop his blathering. He seated Mina at Will’s side, belatedly realizing that he would have to sit opposite his spouse rather than next to him. It didn’t prevent him from brushing his hand over Will’s shoulders as he passed, however, nor did it keep him from catching Will’s beautiful, content smile.

Roland headed the table in glowing pride with his small brood, pleased to have his grandchildren about him. Despite it, he seemed wan and rather tired, Will noted, not quite as attentive as he usually was.

“I am so pleased to see Lord du Maurier again,” Mina whispered, tipping her head down so that Will had to strain to catch her words. Seated across from Hannibal, he found it was incredibly distracting to watch his husband smiling and laughing with his cousin and Grandfather, his usual solemn sobriety giving way to a softer part of him most people missed entirely.

“Anthony mentioned that you had spoken with him shortly before Hannibal returned,” Will said, forcing himself to focus on her words and pay her polite attention. “Which reminds me, Mina—Francis told me you’d sent him looking into Hannibal’s former wife some months ago before he returned.”
“Oh,” she said, tearing her gaze away from Anthony’s profile as the servants began to make their rounds. “Iris and I were discussing it. She asked me if I had spoken with you and I was so sad to tell her that I had not. She mentioned the former Lady Clarges to me. To that time I had never heard a single mention of her. I confess to being terribly surprised by what Francis returned with.”

Will frowned, but had no choice but to accept her reasoning. She had no reason outside of morbid curiosity to seek out the details of Hannibal’s former wife that he could see, and recalled all too clearly how frightened she had seemed for him at the Garden Party.

“Well, I am very happy to have you lovely children with me tonight!” Roland said, gathering their attention to him as he tipped his glass towards them as a whole. “And we are a happily enlarged party now that Will and Hannibal have come home! I hope such blessings will continue and we may be increased yet again with a surety for the Lecter bloodline.”

“Grandfather,” Hannibal said, but still smiled, pleased when he looked at Will. He picked his glass up and lifted it, adding, “There is no greater blessing in the world than the happiness of my beautiful mate.”

Will blushed but a smile played about his lips as he drank, hiding his embarrassment behind the rim of his glass while the starter made its rounds. It was a creamy cucumber soup Will was especially fond of and had been delighted to see on the menu.

He picked up his spoon with happy anticipation, but paused, frowning as he looked at the silver, which was not the set he had kept in place the entirety of his stay at Hartford, but one he had only seen on inventory.

“Mina,” he said, faintly annoyed to think that she might have taken such decisions upon herself. “Did you ask for the silver to be changed?”

Hannibal stifled a cough, covering his mouth with his napkin and turning his head away, shoulders shaking.

“No, dearest, Mr. Hawkes insisted,” Mina told him, cutting a curious look at Hannibal, who cleared his throat and sipped his sherry, his cheeks bright with a blush and his eyes watering.

“Mr. Hawkes?” Will questioned, bewildered. “Is there something wrong with the Duchess set?”

“No, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, his sonorous voice carrying throughout the dining room with ease. “His Lordship requested that the silver be changed.”

“Hannibal?” Will asked, mystified.

Grandfather said absolutely nothing, but his amber eyes brimmed with humor as he looked from Will to Hannibal, his amusement growing by the second.

“I had Hawkes tend to it some time before we left for Marsham Heath,” Hannibal said, moderately composed once again, enough to scowl at Anthony’s grin and Thomas Marlow’s frank curiosity. “I found it too distracting.”

“Distracting,” Will said, stirring his soup, confounded. “That set is your grandfather’s favorite, Hannibal. It had no lack that I could see.”

“I found it threatening,” Hannibal said with a sniff, tugging at his neckerchief.

“Threatening,” Will said, watching him. “A silver set?”

“It was quite indecent,” Hannibal said, gathering his dignity around him lest it all fall to tatters in the course of their conversation. “Decadent, even!”

“Decadent silverware?” Anthony mused, his twinkling eyes skating from Hannibal’s face to Will’s, which was fixed with incredulity.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, compelled to defend himself. “The spoons were especially salacious! How is one expected to hold rational conversation at a table filled with lascivious silverware, hm?”

Will restrained his amusement with difficulty, just watching Hannibal bluster from across the table. He brought a spoonful of soup up to his mouth, his eyes fixed on Hannibal in enjoyment as he tasted it.

There was an immediate swell of desire that bubbled up through the bond as Hannibal watched him, his arguments regarding suggestive spoons dying on his perfect lips.

“It’s neither here nor there,” Mina was saying, her chatter keeping their guests engaged. “It can always be sorted again, can’t it? There are so many sets here, you could change them every day, if needs be!”

Will slid his spoon from between his full lips, amused by the way Hannibal’s eyes tracked the motion. He licked his lips and Hannibal shifted in his seat, clearing his throat again.
“Perhaps we shouldn’t,” he said to his sister, cocking his head to regard the spoon before lifting his dancing blue eyes to Hannibal’s, “if there is some quality to the silver that inspires moral decrepitude.”

Hannibal shifted again, a flush on his high cheeks as he admitted, “It appears to be a quality invested in any tableware we have, provided it is in your perfect hands, Will.”

“Why, Hannibal,” Will said, a smile teasing his lips. He cocked his head, pleased when Hannibal smiled in return, unrepentant and delighted. “What on earth could you possibly mean?”

“Children,” Roland said, the note of warning belied by the amused smile on his lined face.

“It appears the problem does not originate with the silverware in the least,” Hannibal said, paying the favor back to Will with a taste of his own soup. Will had to admit, it was moderately more distracting than he’d first thought to watch Hannibal’s lips slide around the silverware. It brought a forceful reminder from his vivid imagination of that same precise movement not an hour before as Hannibal bent his head to Will’s groin.

He twitched in his seat, staring at Hannibal's tongue as it flicked to chase a drop of soup from his lower lip. He was nearly not paying attention to his husband’s words at all when Hannibal said, “It turns out I appreciate them all with equal fervor when they are put to such excellent use.”

Will’s surprised grin became a pleased, raspy laugh, his amused exasperation growing with every knowing glance exchanged between Hannibal and himself, much to Grandfather’s delighted observation.

“That is an entirely odd thing to say, Hannibal, dear,” Mina remarked, exchanging a confused look with Thomas. “Do you appreciate the salacious spoons, or do you wish to be rid of them?”

“Yes, I think, is the answer to that, Mina,” Will replied with another throaty chuckle, and returned to his soup with gusto under Hannibal’s watchful eyes.

It made for a pleasant, enjoyable meal, their party small enough to allow light conversation and catching up between them. They had only just finished the main course when there was somewhat of a commotion out of sight. Mr. Hawkes left to investigate, his expression thunderous, but he returned with near immediacy, his face drawn with concern as he moved to Hannibal’s side. Will saw him hand Hannibal a folded message as he leaned down to mutter something into Hannibal’s ear.

Mina, Anthony, and Thomas took not notice of it, involved in their banter as they were, but Will felt a sudden spike of fear through his bond when Hannibal read the note, strong enough that he cautiously asked, “Hannibal?”

“It's too early,” Hannibal said, his voice strained and hoarse. He passed the paper to Grandfather, who skimmed it and handed it to Will with a shaking hand, a scowl darkening his lean face.

“Excuse me,” Hannibal said, rising with minimal fuss, his movements tight and short.

Will unfolded the message, written in ragged, feminine hand, the anxiety as sharp as the peaks and dips of the letters crossing the page.

‘We have come to Chelsea House. Forgive us, we didn’t know where to go. Alana is in labor and we need you.

‘Margot’

“Is something the matter?” Anthony asked, confusion chasing the smile from his face as Hannibal tossed his napkin down.

“Everything is fine,” Will said, tucking the note into his jacket as Hannibal rushed out of the dining room. “Please, let’s enjoy the rest of dinner. Mrs. Pimms has made her prize-winning sponge cake for dessert and I, for one, should hate to miss it.”

“Will,” Grandfather said, shaking his head only slightly, a wish rather than an order.

“I will return in a moment, Grandfather,” he said, laying his napkin aside and giving the older Alpha’s hand a light squeeze. “If you will excuse me?”

He rose with Mr. Hawkes on his heels. Once they were clear of the dining room, he stopped and asked, “Has Mr. Berger gone up?”

“His Lordship will have called for him already, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, the pair of them joined by Mrs. Henderson, who wrung her hands in distress.

“Have two horses saddled and waiting on the drive, Mr. Hawkes,” Will quietly instructed “Have you the train schedule we returned with?”

“Yes, my Lord, I’ll fetch it right away!” Mrs. Henderson said, rushing off to do just that.
“Mr. Hawkes, if you could please send Mr. Berger the train schedule when you’ve finished?” Will asked. “And please fetch me before his Lordship leaves?”

He moved swiftly back towards the dining room as Mr. Hawkes called after him, “Yes, my Lord.”

It was agonizing to sit through Mrs. Pimms’ lauded sponge cake when Hannibal was so deeply disturbed and agitated upstairs. Grandfather valiantly took the burden of conversation on himself, entertaining them with stories of the family that kept their guests in cackling laughter.

Will heard little of it. He kept one eye on the dining room door, growing more restless by the moment. When Mr. Hawkes finally motioned from the doorway, Will stood in a surge of nervous energy, murmuring, “excuse me,” as he swiftly left the dining room.

Hannibal came rushing down the stairs as Will reached them, already dressed for travel, his coat billowing out behind him with the speed of his descent. Berger followed in his wake, the train schedule clutched in one gloved fist, his face grim with concern.

Will came to a stop, breathing deeply to calm his shaky nerves. Just the sight of Hannibal so tense and worried sent a pulse of pain through his heart, no less than the fear that slithered through his bond like a creeping shadow.

Berger scooted past them both, heading for the front door to ensure the mounts were ready for their departure, too wise to embroil himself in their private discussion.

“Will,” Hannibal said, spying him there and moving to reach him. “I am so sorry—”

“Hannibal, no,” Will said, the even calm in his voice pausing him, his amber eyes shaded with worry. “You can hardly control an emergency. You are needed there.”

Hannibal flinched. His voice was hoarse when he asked, “As I am needed here?”

Will smiled and reached out, the brush of his fingers light against Hannibal’s cheek, but even so faint a touch was enough to drain the tension out of his husband’s shoulders. Hannibal tipped his face to that touch, clasping Will’s hand to his cheek with a soft sigh.

“Can you ever doubt it,” Will murmured, smoothing his thumb over the stark curve of Hannibal’s cheekbone. “Of course you are, Hannibal.”

Hannibal turned his head, inhaling against the soft skin of Will’s wrist to gather his scent.

“Gods, I am half a mind to take you with me,” he said, rubbing against Will’s hand, a dangerous, silken cat purring to his touch.

“There is hope, isn’t there?” Will whispered. Sympathy for Alana and Margot both rose to the surface, sympathy for the fear that they must be feeling after everything they had already lost. He knew that were he in their place, he too would want Hannibal there for support.

“There is always hope,” Hannibal said, allowing himself to linger in these last few precious moments with his mate before they were parted yet again. “I will do what I can to ensure nothing more goes wrong than Nature intended.”

Sudden determination lit his amber eyes then, a kind of grim somberness overcoming him as he said, “Go to my suite after dinner, Will. I’ve left a pistol in a lock box for you. The key is in my tray.”

“Hannibal—”

“I trust you can shoot?”

Will nodded and Hannibal mirrored him, relieved.

“Good. I want you to carry it with you at all times, Will. You may never be unarmed, my love, but a bullet is far more convincing than a trout.” He trailed off with a pained, crooked smile, amber eyes weary and filled with yearning. His voice was thick with emotion when he whispered, “Stay safe in my absence, Will. Do nothing impulsive or dangerous until I am home to be frightened by it.”

“You’d best come back quickly, then,” Will said, turning his fingers against Hannibal’s cheek to brush beneath his jaw, skimming the places where his scent was heaviest. “Go safely and come back to me, Hannibal.”

“A faithful heart will always bring me back home,” Hannibal whispered, kissing the pulse in Will’s wrist. “I will always return to you, Will.”
Will smiled and slid his hand to Hannibal's chest, closing his eyes to feel the pump and thump of it beneath warm skin and firm muscle. *His* home, fragile and finite and caged in bone, but his to its depths, singing to his touch and beating the syllables of his name.

“Send word,” he whispered, slitting his eyes open.

“I will,” Hannibal promised, pulling Will's hand to his lips.

“And give my regards to Miss Bloom and Miss Verger. I do hope for the very best outcome for them and the baby,” Will said, motion at the corner of his vision showing him Thomas Marlow and Anthony watching them, lingering in the hallway on their way to take brandy with Grandfather.

“I will tell them,” Hannibal said, knowing they had an audience and not caring in the least. He pulled Will against his chest and hugged him close, pressing a gentle, loving kiss to the rim of his ear, engulfing him in strength and his earthy Alpha scent.

“Be careful, Hannibal,” Will whispered, taking a shaky breath, his calm vanishing in a flood of anxiety for him, in a rush of tenderness for the Alpha he claimed as his own. He hugged Hannibal with all of his strength, as if the force of his affection might shield his husband from circumstances and events outside of his control. “Do your very best for them.”

“I will,” he breathed again, brushing his mouth over Will's in a brief, sweet kiss.

Before the warmth of his body had faded he was gone, leaving Will silent and trembling at the foot of the stairs, a solitary figure with his fingers pressed to his mouth, holding Hannibal's parting kiss to his lips.

Chapter 41

Hartford House was quiet as it settled down for the night, though staff still hurried about below stairs getting things set to rights after dinner. With their guests packed off back to Fernhill and Grandfather retiring to his suite, it seemed a pall had fallen over the evening. Their happy homecoming had been pressed with the potential for tragedy and Will found himself restless as he mounted the stairs, his thoughts returning time and again to Alana and how frightened she must surely feel.

Winston whined uneasily at his side, anxious. Peter had returned him to the house freshly brushed and smelling strongly of mint, and Will was grateful for his company as he let himself into his suite, his presence keeping Will's dread somewhat at bay.

He undressed in silence in his massive dressing room, the echoes of his movements a hollow sound that brought his spirits low. He put his cuff links and pocket watch away, smiling as he ran his fingers over the filigreed watch cover. Jimmy had procured a proper box for him and the sight of all those watches Hannibal had purchased lightened his heart somewhat. He would even now be on the train to the Capital, Will imagined. No doubt he had paced and frothed at the station, anxious to be on his way, exhausted to find himself returning so soon.

Will very deliberately did not touch the bond, though he was tempted. He couldn't bring himself to, not yet and not now. The abrupt haste of their parting under such dismal circumstances had knocked him off balance, a light flick from Fate's fingers reminding him of days past when he believed that his happiness would always be momentary, would always be punished.

“Not anymore,” he murmured, fighting the loneliness that threatened. He *missed* Hannibal. He missed him with a strength that frightened him. It was only a fraction of what he might feel had they bonded properly, he knew, but even that fraction was quite enough.

He quickly pulled his nightshirt on and covered it with his dressing gown, giving himself a mental shake. He couldn't bring himself to, not yet and not now. The abrupt haste of their parting under such dismal circumstances had knocked him off balance, a light flick from Fate's fingers reminding him of days past when he believed that his happiness would always be momentary, would always be punished.

“Not anymore,” he murmured, fighting the loneliness that threatened. He *missed* Hannibal. He missed him with a strength that frightened him. It was only a fraction of what he might feel had they bonded properly, he knew, but even that fraction was quite enough.

He quickly pulled his nightshirt on and covered it with his dressing gown, giving himself a mental shake. Hannibal would return as quickly as possible and was no more settled in this separation than he was. All would be well, and this strange sense of bleakness would fade beneath his husband's teasing smiles and dancing golden eyes when he returned to take his place.

Winston yipped a split second before a soft knock came at the door. Will, still tying his dressing gown sash, emerged to say, “Yes?”

“It’s me, dearest, are you decent?” Mina called, easing the door open. She was in her nightclothes, her hair in a heavy braid over her shoulder and a single taper in her dainty hand.
“You should have a lamp, Mina,” Will scolded, closing his dressing room door behind him. “Hartford House tends to be drafty.”

“It was too much bother,” she said, placing the candle down on his vanity and blowing out the flame. She straightened, smoothing a lock of hair out of her face, her expression pensive and troubled.

“Is something on your mind?” Will inquired, abandoning his plans to read quietly before making an early night of it.

“The emergency Hannibal left to attend,” she said, drawing closer, her hands clasped tightly before her, “has it something to do with his mistress?”

Will frowned, his stare steady and unhappy. He picked up his book, a pang striking him when he heard the echo of Hannibal’s voice saying, ‘That is an instruction for monkhood...’

“Why would you ask me such a thing, Mina?” Will asked, seating himself in his little armchair and fussing with the soft edge of his dressing gown. “More to the point, why do you expect I would tell you?”

“Because I am your sister and I love you, Will,” Mina said, dropping into the chair opposite him, pitched forward like a bird poised to take flight. The voluminous folds of her nightgown and wrapper frothed around her, shrouding her slender body in layers of cascading fabric. “I overheard Mr. Marlow speaking to Lord du Maurier about it. It was nothing but supposition, but he seemed convinced that Hannibal had flown off to be at her side as she brings his child into this world.”

Will shifted, avoiding her searching eyes. They had spoken too freely in parting, perhaps too loudly for interested ears, and Thomas Marlow was no stranger to Alana Bloom.

“He was telling Anthony he would have to return to the Capital to support her,” she went on, her fingers rubbing a nervous rhythm on the chair’s arm. “He is her friend, you know. Why, I imagine he might possibly be more, upset as he was. But it would be somewhat amusing, dearest, wouldn’t it, if Hannibal’s mistress disported herself with—”

“Mina, that is quite enough,” Will said, and even though his voice was soft, the sharpness of his words and the look he leveled at her was enough to silence her. “Not only is this a subject that is entirely off limits to any fanciful imaginings, I will not allow you to speak so disrespectfully of someone whose situation and life you know nothing about.”

Mina drew back as if Will had slapped her, a pretty blush rising on her cheeks. Indignant, she said, “Well. I had no idea you had such a fondness for your husband’s lovers, Will! Perhaps once the baby is born, they might move here to Hartford? The three of you could share a bed; I am sure it would be quite cozy!”

“Mina!” Will said, astonished that she would suggest such a thing. “Hannibal’s relationships and associations are none of your concern! Nor is how we conduct our private lives! If I wanted to bring every lover the world has ever imagined for him into this house and into our bed, I would do so and it would still be no one’s business but ours!”

She stared at him, her blue eyes wide and furious, her nostril flaring with the force of her breath.

“Hannibal is a doctor,” Will said, almost angry himself. “He has been called to assist a patient in their time of need. Whatever Mr. Marlow believes is irrelevant.”

“Not to anyone else,” she pointed out. “Not that it will be much of a surprise to Society that he is back to his old habits. I’m sure soon enough you’ll be ripe as a peach with his baby. If there is one thing the world can count on, it’s a man staying true to his vices.”

“Hannibal isn’t like that, Mina,” Will said, shaking his head. “Even were I big as a house with his child, he would never turn the least of his attentions elsewhere.”

She cocked her head, assessing him as if he was a curiosity on display.

“Do you truly think so?” she purred, her smile small and tight. “Will, you may have been married longer than I, but of the two of us, I know more of men and their frailties. I am telling you, Will, once they get what they want, they discard you.”

The chill in her words frightened him almost as much as the bitter unhappiness so clear on her face.

“Hannibal’s every action and word reaffirms to me that his attachment is neither trivial nor fleeting,” Will assured her. Wistful affection tinged his voice when he added, “He loves me, Mina.”

“Darling, when they’re as deep as they can get in the only place they ever want to be, they always love you,” Mina sighed, shaking her head. “Inconvenience them in the slightest? They’ll forget they ever said such a thing. They are monsters, Will, programmed to gorge themselves on whatever they desire and they will say anything, do anything to that end.”

She sat back in her chair, shoulders straight, staring at him from beneath her lashes.
“I wonder what he wanted from you?” she mused. “I mean... six years missing.”

Will’s eyes narrowed, his heart picking up its pace.

“And suddenly he returns so entirely agreeable,” Mina breathed, her words uncoiling from her full lips, a serpent with ill intent seeking the warm flesh of Will’s hope to sour with a venomous strike. “Surely it wasn’t just fear for His Grace’s health. He should have been beaten from the grounds for the way he’s treated you, yet you merely opened your arms to him at the first opportunity.”

Will wet his lower lip with the tip of his tongue, struggling to contain his anger and indignation at what she dared to say to him.

“That isn’t true, Mina,” he told her, certainty firming his words. “And that isn’t what Hannibal wants.”

“Darling, it’s what they all want,” she said, baring her teeth in a smile. “And Hannibal wants that child, Will. His heir, his little boy. What better way to ensure he gets him than to breed you during your most fertile time?”

“Mina!” Will said, her name a crack of irritation. He was aghast that she would use his prior confidences to try to wound him, but not entirely surprised. “You will not speak so of the man in whose house you have been living quite happily!”

“It is your house, Will. Which raises a good point. When His Grace put control of Hartford in your hands, it was limited, was it not?” she asked, all innocence. “Bear Hannibal an Alpha son and Hartford House returns to his keeping. I would say that is quite an incentive for a man like Hannibal Lecter, Will. It’s no wonder he’s been so accommodating, and so ready to abandon you for the woman he prefers. He must surely think you’ve kindled already and he can return to the life he truly enjoys while you nurture his heir... at least, Mr. Marlow seems to think so.”

Will flinched, fingers clenching on his book.

“That wasn’t what Hannibal was after, Mina,” he quietly informed her. “And yes, I am well aware of the terms by which Hartford House was given to me when I first arrived. I never expected I would keep control of it, Mina. This house belongs to the Lecters and I always intended to return it to them should my marriage fail.”

“Apparently, he couldn’t wait that long,” Mina said, smirking.

“There is every possibility that I would not provide him with an heir, but with daughters or even Omegas,” Will sharply said, his irritation rising. “That was the very reason he fled Hartford in the first place, as there was no guarantee our coming together would give him the Alpha son that Grandfather required!”

He trembled, frustrated with her and seething, outraged on Hannibal’s behalf as well as his own. His words were little better than a soft snarl when he flared, “I may not be able to give him a child at all.”

Mina’s eyes narrowed, searching him for signs of dissembling.

“Hannibal accepts that,” Will said, swallowing hard as he got his temper under control. All of his husband’s reassurances flashed through his memory at once, drawing his anger from him. “Even should I never give him a single child, Mina, it will not change his affection or attachment to me.”

Mina blinked, a slow, studied movement that conveyed nothing but disdain.

“So he says,” she murmured. “Yet still he tries, dearest, doesn’t he? But I’m sure you’re right, Will. After all, you surely know him better than Thomas Marlow, who has been his friend for six years while you’ve sequestered yourself here in bitter solitude.”

Will’s mouth thinned to a grim, irritated line, bowing down with unhappiness.

“I imagine that even if Thomas rattles that loose tongue of his to everyone in his acquaintance,” she said, picking at a thread on her dressing gown, “then no one will pay him the least bit of attention. We all know that men like Thomas care very little for the truth. Though I get the impression he has no affection for you, Will, and rather a lot for Miss Bloom, I trust your confidence in Hannibal’s fickle fidelity will silence any gossip that Mr. Marlow might start, hm?”

She slid to her feet and came to him, stroking her fingers through his curls. As children, the touch had always soothed him, a small and tender affection so rare that his whole heart had hoarded it.

Now it just left him cold, as cold as the look on her face when she gazed down at him cat-rapt and intense.

“He will return soon, Will, compelled by his great love for you. Surely he wouldn’t stay in the Capital, undoubtedly with his mistress and newborn child, while there is a celebration here at Hartford in honor of you? That would be terribly cruel, wouldn’t it? And we both know Hannibal is never cruel, dearest, don’t we?” She retrieved her taper, bending to light it from
one of the lamps Jimmy had left lit for him. With a small, pleased smile, she said, “Goodnight, darling. I hope you have only the sweetest of dreams.”

Will stared at the door for a long time after she closed it behind her, flustered and angry and deeply wounded by her words, by the doubts she tried to instill and by the doubts she knew still plagued him. Whether it came from a place of love, as she claimed, or a place of malice, as it seemed, she had accomplished her purpose. If Hannibal had not returned to Hartford House by the time their guests arrived, there would be ample fodder for the gossips to carry home to their parlors and their relationship would once more be the subject of cruel speculation.

Winston got to his feet, whining softly at Will as he grew more agitated. His tail gave a small wag that was both tentative and hopeful when Will looked down at him.

“Well, she rather put a damper on my evening, I can tell you that,” Will confided, stroking Winston’s head. “But we have no time for her nonsense, do we? Come along, Winston, I’d best collect that pistol Hannibal left me or he’ll be beside himself with frustration when he returns.”

Will got up, his book under his arm, and put out the lamps in silence. Despite his insistence, his mind turned Mina’s words over and over like a puzzle box, searching for seams to unravel it and finding none, the purpose of her visit still a confounding mystery.

Taking up the single lamp left, he let himself in through the washroom to Hannibal’s suite, chuckling when Winston hurtled past him in eager anticipation of finding Hannibal there.

“I’m sorry, Winston,” Will said, passing the huge tub with a fond smile as he followed the dog into Hannibal’s room, “he’s not here.”

It left a cold lump in the pit of his stomach to say it, to walk into a room still heavy with Hannibal’s Alpha fragrance when the man himself was so far away. The room lay shrouded with shadows and swallowed in darkness that might have been oppressive were it not for his mate’s comforting scent. The enormous bed Will had hoped to share with him lay empty, the curtains drawn back in preparation, undisturbed by Hannibal’s hasty departure.

A departure Society would see as his abandonment of Will yet again, should Thomas Marlow have any say in things.

Will’s chin tipped up, pride and his own stubborn nature refusing to bend to the least of it. For everything he had lived through and everything still before him, cruel words whispered behind his back were the least of his worries. Parlor gossip couldn’t hold a candle to being pushed down the stairs, after all.

The key to the lock box was just where Hannibal had left it, nestled in the silver tray where he usually discarded his cuff links. Will fished it out and unlocked the small box to find a compact but fully loaded pistol in a velveteen cradle. There was a folded note between the weapon and the hollow that held it, and Will opened it by lamplight.

“For when you have run out of trout, my love.

Hannibal

Will grinned, a soft, husky rasp of laughter escaping him that brought Winston’s ears to perk. It faded quickly, however, sinking beneath the weight of anxiety that had dodged his footsteps all evening. He put his book down to run his fingers over the brushes on Hannibal’s vanity, over the bottle of very light aftershave he preferred, over the boxes generation after generation of Lecter men had used to hold their small vanities of cuff links and watch fobs and chains.

He’d never come in this room even once in all the years he’d spent in Hartford House. He’d never tried the door, never passed the threshold, only instructed a weekly airing and change of bedding in case Hannibal should return unannounced.

Yet in this very room, in the empty bed before him, Hannibal had soothed his wounds, had touched his scars, had spoken of his personal pains and begun the process of healing them both that had led to them sharing the most intimate and vulnerable moment Will would ever share in his life.

‘And Hannibal wants that child, Will. His heir, his little boy. What better way to ensure he gets him than to breed you during your most fertile time?’

Some small, mean part of his secret heart was furious at Mina for trying to sully that time for him, for trying to twist his memories of the heat they’d spent together into a sordid lie driven by intrigue. It was the same small, mean part of him that still doubted himself and he resented Mina for hitting so effortlessly on it. She knew better than anyone how Hannibal’s
departure felt beneath the surface of understanding and logic and the reassurance of his bond. She saw it as the world would see it, how anyone would care to see it when the truth was something none of them could confess to.

Will drew a deep, unsteady breath heavy with Hannibal’s scent and closed the box, leaving it unlocked in case he had need of it. Winston sniffed around the darkened room, investigating every corner as if he might somehow reveal his master hiding there. Eventually he gave up, jumped up on the bed, and curled into a dejected ball with a despondent sigh.

“Winston,” Will said, placing his little lamp on the nightstand and moving to sit next to him. He stroked the dog’s soft head and fuzzy ears, smiling when Winston rolled his brown eyes up, the very picture of misery. “You miss him, too, don’t you?”

Winston whined, his tail thumping gently against the bed, delighted by any attention Will would pay him.

Will sighed and looked around, dreading a return to his cold bed. This would be his first night alone since before his heat. He’d grown used to the warm strength of his husband curled around him and he was reluctant to leave the small comfort he found being surrounded with Hannibal’s presence.

But then, there was no reason he had to leave at all, was there?

“What do you think, boy?” Will murmured, rubbing Winston beneath his chin. “He will have to become accustomed to the scent of dog eventually, won’t he? Where better to start than where he sleeps?”

Where they would soon sleep together, he hoped.

He shed his dressing gown, draping it neatly over the back of Hannibal’s favorite fireside chair, and folded the covers back. Even without Hannibal having slept there, his Alpha scent clung to everything, cradling Will’s senses in the same way Hannibal’s strong arms always cradled his body.

He blew out the small lamp and snuggled down into the bed, pulling the layers of sheets and downy blankets up to counter the ever-present chill in the air. After a few moments, Winston edged his way up and curled up against Will’s back, heaving a grunting sight of contentment.

Will closed his eyes, finally reaching for the bond as he lay floating in Hannibal’s earthy Alpha scent. He found worry, impatience, fatigue, and hope that flowed into him without reserve.

And beneath it was the distant, rhythmic whisper of his name echoing like a heartbeat to soothe him to sleep.

zzz

Mr. Black was a refreshing ocean of calm in an otherwise chaotic situation when Hannibal arrived, red-eyed, tired, and uncomfortable from a train ride that had taken far too long under such circumstances.

“The midwife has come, my Lord,” he said, relieving Hannibal of his coat, hat, and gloves in the doorway. “Miss Bloom is progressing rather slowly, by her report. I put them in the Daisy Room.”

“Thank you, Black,” Hannibal said, shrugging off his jacket as well in preparation for the work ahead. A ragged, half-snarled howl sounded above him, pausing him only momentarily. “Did Marissa accompany them?”

“She did. She is up in the maids’ quarters with her nurse, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, tending to Hannibal’s things with care. “I will send Mr. Berger up with your medical bag and I have footmen at the ready should you need anything from your office.”

“Thank you, Black,” Hannibal said again, and bounded up the stairs two at a time towards the increasing ruckus.

“If you could just—”

“I am not a Ladyship! I am a Miss! I am a Miss!” Alana cried, sounding frayed and frustrated and frightened.

Hannibal spied Margot lingering at the doorway, giving instructions to a rather nervous maid. She sent her off and offered Hannibal a wan, worried smile, holding her hands out to him, which he clasped briefly in his with a warm squeeze.

“Thank gods you’re here,” she said, flinching when Alana uttered a pained, unhappy sob.

“I came as quickly as I could,” Hannibal said, rolling back his sleeves and skating a glance into the Daisy Room. “Thank your gods for the train, Margot, else your message would not have reached me in time.”

“I shouldn’t have written for you, I was just so worried,” Margot whispered, trembling. “She’s early.”

“What on earth were you doing in the Capital?” Hannibal asked, waiting for another breathless cry to end.
“Mr. Flynn from the School had arranged a time for us to walk the grounds with the surveyors. It was all very last minute,” Margot said, casting another worried glance inside. “Alana insisted she come. We had a squad of men escort us and we intended to return home this evening, but all that walking was too much for her. Gods, we were so worried Mason might show up that we never considered something like this.”

“Margot, you—”

“Lord Clarges?” Alana called, hearing his voice in the hallway. “Margot! I told you not to send for him! Both of you come here!”

“You first,” Hannibal whispered, scowling when Margot shook her head and pushed him ahead of her.

“Miss Bloom,” he said, taking note of the harried midwife, who looked particularly displeased by his arrival. Alana stood at the foot of the bed clinging to the bedpost, one hand at the small of her back and her face red with effort. “You look perfectly beautiful.”

She glared at him, her mouth set with impatience.

“Pregnancy always has agreed with you,” he said, offering his most charming smile.

“Labor, however, doesn’t?” she called, swaying when another pain hit her.

“Oh, he would never say that,” Margot soothed, moving to draw Alana’s loose hair back from her face.

“Only think it,” Alana said, slitting her eyes open to glower his direction. “You shouldn’t be here!”

“I think I’m the one who should be saying that,” Hannibal pointed out. “What on earth were you doing out with surveyors so near your time?”

“They didn’t have any other available dates and I am not near my time!” she flared, transferring her hand from her back to her belly. “I wasn’t planning for confinement for another month, at least!”

Fear filled her eyes, then, the driving force behind her short temper.

“It’s going to be alright, isn’t it?” she asked, her voice cracking on a sob, the pain as much emotional as physical.

“Hannibal...”

Margot hugged her from behind, resting her head against Alana’s and trying to soothe her.

“It’s going to be fine,” Hannibal said, moving towards her but holding himself in check. He smiled, putting every bit of his confidence into his expression to calm her before he said, “Miss Shell is an excellent midwife. And it is exceptionally good to see you here, Miss Shell.”

“Wish I could say the same, Doctor, but you know my opinion about men in the birthing room,” Miss Shell sniffed, disapproving.

“Yes, Miss Shell, your opinion on the subject has never been in doubt to anyone with functional hearing,” Hannibal said, smiling. “But I am very pleased to see you nonetheless. I assure you, you are in the best of hands, Miss Bloom.”

Her smile was tremulous, dissolving into frightened, exhausted tears as she leaned into Margot, her fingers so tight on the wood that her nails blanched. Margot held her close, just as she had with Marissa, sharing Alana’s pain as she always had and always would.

“Let’s get you comfortable, shall we?” Hannibal asked, and moved to peel her hand loose from where it clenched so tightly.

It was a surprisingly difficult labor for a baby who had decided to come early and couldn’t wait to emerge, difficult for Alana as well as Margot. For the most part, Hannibal had no role in the process, which he was rather used to in times like these, being there more as a precaution than anything. As he watched, however, the true agony of childbirth impressed itself upon him for the first time. He imagined Will in Alana’s place, suffering the terrible pain of bringing a life into this world with the chance that everything could go wrong, that the baby might not survive, that Will might not survive. It left him cold, and a selfish, hard part of himself half-hoped that Will was right and there would be no children.

Because he would gladly bear any pain in the world rather than see his cherished mate in so much torment.

“Doctor, head is presenting,” Miss Shell announced, bringing an excited, exhausted laugh from the Misses.

From there it was fast; the baby emerged into the world to a chorus of relieved voices, sliding into Hannibal’s clean, waiting hands in beautiful miniature, ruddy and small and bearing a crown of thick, dark hair. Miss Shell moved with the precision of a soldier at drills, swiftly tying off the cord and cutting it to free the infant into their new environment.
“There’s a good baby,” Hannibal crooned, gently wiping it clean as he had a cursory check. The low, vibrating Alpha purr in his voice brought a startled little hiccup from the infant and it bellowed, red-faced and furious, much to Hannibal’s delight. He grinned at Alana and said, “He has your temper.”

“It’s a boy?” Alana asked, laughing in relief, tears streaming down her face as Margot kissed her cheek, delighted.

“I hope you will be on your toes, my dears,” Hannibal said, eyes sparkling. “You have yourselves an Alpha. And he’s a healthy little man, aren’t you, darling, hm?”

“He’s smaller than Marissa was,” Margot said, a note of concern in her voice. She wiped at the tears on her face, not even that worry enough to steal her relief.

“We’ve had smaller,” Miss Shell said, her hard edge forgotten in the happiness of a successful birth. “Haven’t we, Doctor?”

“Oh, yes, we have,” Hannibal said, crooning to the child as he wrapped him up, cradling him in one arm. “Yes, we most certainly have, haven’t we? You’re rather bigger than I expected, little one, hm? Good thing, since you were so ready to come out.”

He eased the baby down into Alana’s trembling arms, tears filling his eyes as the Misses wept, holding their son and clinging to one another.

Hannibal stood apart from them and watched euphoria replace the awful pain of the past endless hours, watched how pleasure lit up their faces as they welcomed their new baby into this world. Seeing them rejoice, he felt the final ties that bound them sever, the loose ends coiling to encapsulate their new addition. He reached for Will on pure instinct, seeking his own connection, needing his mate to share his happiness. His fingers found and caressed the blue garter ribbon threaded through his watch chain, all dark thoughts banished by the sight of celebration and the faint sugary sweet flavor of Will’s scent still clinging to the ribbon. He reached for a bond he knew wasn’t there for him, but that didn’t stop him from trying. He took every happiness, very trembling triumph and incredible miracle of this moment, every hope he held that they might have their own children some day, and he thought of Will with all of his might.

Far away in Hartford House, Will Lecter-Graham woke from his deep, easy slumber and smiled, happy tears welling down his cheeks in the starlit darkness of Hannibal’s bed.

Will armed himself in far more than clothing when he rose the next day, confident and relaxed from what the bond had provided him in the early morning hours. The pistol Hannibal had left him weighted his pocket, a heavy reminder that he had more than just his wits to defend himself with, should the need arise.

Without Hannibal there, the bulk of the work fell once more to Will, which included the disposition of Francis Dolarhyde. Who, unfortunately, was nowhere to be found.

“I beg your pardon, could you say that again,” Will asked, cocking his head. “Mr. Dolarhyde has gone?”

“Yes, your Lordship,” the detective said, frowning.

“Gone where, exactly?” Will asked, putting his pen down to give the whole of his attention to the man before him.

“We don’t know, my Lord,” the other detective said, embarrassed. “We paid a lad to keep track of his whereabouts when we weren’t able and Dolarhyde vanished.”

“How long ago was this?” Will asked, drumming his fingers on the desk.

“Couldn’t be more than a day or two.”

“A day or two,” Will echoed, his frown deepening. “And you have no idea where he’s gone?”

There was a somewhat shamefaced response to that which failed to satisfy Will’s unease.

“Well, I suppose it’s a good thing you’re detectives,” Will said, his smile tight and unhappy. “I want you to begin searching for him.”

“My Lord, one of us—”

“No, detective, both of you,” Will said, holding up a hand to hush him. “I insist. Mr. Dolarhyde has a troubling history of violence. There is suspicion he may have been involved in the deaths of two officers from Moseley. You absolutely will not attempt to engage with him alone. Send to the Capital if you must for help, but I want no one putting themselves at risk for this issue.”
“What do you want done when we find him, my Lord?”

“Tell him he is to contact Mr. Buddish in the Capital for my instructions, or else he is to return to Hartford Town and send word to me here,” Will said, pushing to his feet. “In both cases relay to him that I wish to fill my debt. He will do as he is bidden, if he is half the man I believe him to be.”

“Right away, my Lord.”

Mr. Hawkes came in as they went out, bearing a letter on the familiar silver salver.

“This came by courier via the train, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes informed him, both mildly awed as well as scandalized by the mode of the letter’s arrival.

Will took it up with a murmured thanks, his heart leaping when he saw it was from Chelsea House, the paper still holding a trace of Hannibal’s scent.

Will,

The baby was born without incident very early this morning, an Alpha male that the Misses are calling Morgan. He is off to a good start, but he is somewhat frail. Alana is mending, Margot is beside herself with happiness, and the first thing Marissa did upon seeing her baby brother was say ‘no’ and begin to cry, so they are off to the usual sort of start. I am making arrangements for them with an associate of mine; however, Alana and Morgan both need time to recover and I shall need to remain to watch over them for now until things are settled.

I wish I were there with you now, Will, even if you are contemplating violence. No doubt you have had ample time to consider how this will read in the Society column. I am making plans for that, however. I promised you that I would put all else aside and I always keep my promises. Trust me, Will. Believe in the best of me, as I believe in the best of you, and be certain that my love for you will always guide my actions.

Yours, always and forever,

Hannibal

“Good news, I trust, my Lord?” Mr. Hawkes asked, relieved by the smile that curved Will’s full lips.

“Very good, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, releasing a deep sigh to have his knowledge confirmed in writing. “The emergency has been handled and Lord Clarges is tending to the details now.”

Mr. Hawkes’ silvering brows drew together in concern, then, and he asked, “Please, forgive me, my Lord, but will his Lordship be home in time for His Grace’s gathering?”

“Yes,” Will said, confident that he would not be made a liar, putting his faith in Hannibal, just as he’d been asked. He tucked the letter into his breast pocket, thinking he might soon run out of room to keep stashing things from his husband inside of his jewelry box. “He certainly will, Mr. Hawkes. Is Grandfather awake?”

“He is, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes confirmed, and Will promptly set out for Grandfather’s suite.

“Oh! My Lord! The first of the applicants for the position has arrived at the office,” Mr. Hawkes said, gliding in Will’s wake with portly grace. “Should I send someone to make excuses?”

“No, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, shaking his head, his determined stride eating up the distance to Grandfather’s rooms. He paused at the doorway, one hand pressing to his lower belly in an absent gesture that did not escape an old hand like Mr. Hawkes. “Hartford House needs a qualified land agent and I am the best one to make such a decision, all things considered. Have refreshments sent down to content them and tell them I will be there within half an hour.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, his face wreathed in a delighted smile Will found rather odd for such a simple request. He put it out of his mind, however, and knocked on Grandfather’s door, somewhat surprised when Mr. Zeller was the one who opened it for him.

“I hadn’t realized you’d returned, Mr. Zeller,” Will said, stepping into the suite to allow the scruffy-looking valet to close the door behind him.

“Yeah, well, I try not to stay gone too long recently,” Zeller said with his usual amount of cheek. “It seems like every time I get back, he’s spiraled down a little further. Go on in. He’s up, or as up as he’s liable to get today.”

Will moved through Roland’s sitting room and into his bedroom, pausing for a moment in the doorway.

Roland was still abed, looking exhausted and drawn. Staff busied about his room drawing the curtains open and unlatching the windows to let in a breath of fresh air that he seemed desperately in need of.
“Good morning, Grandfather,” Will said, moving to fill the bedside chair, a place where he had passed many a long winter’s night reading to Roland or listening to his stories.

“Good morning, my dear,” Roland said, drawing a breath that pained him. His skeletal fingers stretched out and Will moved to grasp them, wounded by how frail he seemed. “You look particularly beautiful today, Will. So much like him. Sometimes it hurts me, you know? How the pair of you resemble him…”

Will smiled, chafing Roland’s hand to warm his papery, thin skin.

“Aunt Margaret didn’t tell us as much as Hannibal would like you to think,” Will said, pleased when Roland managed a wince, the man within unchanged by the years that had ravaged his body. “But I feel we should discuss that when you are feeling better, Grandfather. We will have plenty of evenings this winter to do so.”

He trailed off, wondering if they would have such. It felt vile and unkind to even consider it, but it felt just as unkind not to.

“I’ve come to tell you that the baby has been delivered,” he said, deciding not to use up what little energy Roland had. “A little boy. He’s an Alpha, and early, but he is thriving.”

Roland frowned and made a weak, sweeping gesture that instantly cleared the room of servants, leaving the pair of them alone. It took several concerning moments for him to manage, “I am not legitimizing the child.”

Will was too startled for a moment to answer properly, but shook himself and said, “No, Grandfather, of course not. Hannibal hasn’t told you? The baby isn’t his.”

Roland’s amber gaze sharpened, his mouth bowing in a confused frown.

“I’d rather he tell you the details,” Will gently insisted, kissing Roland’s bony knuckles, “but he has no children, Grandfather. Hannibal has never fathered a child outside of our marriage.”

“You…” Roland wheezed, wetting his lips, his fingers twitching in Will’s grasp. “You believe him, my dear?”

“Your grandson is pompous, arrogant, and incredibly overbearing, but he is certainly no liar,” Will said, his gentle grin teasing an answering smile from Roland. “He confessed a great deal to me, Grandfather, most of which is not mine to repeat. The heart of the matter is that his reputation is somewhat inflated and he has vowed to maintain the sanctity of our marriage bed now that we share it.”

One bushy white eyebrow shot up over one amber eye and there was a world of amusement in Roland’s voice when he asked, “Sanctity?”

“Something like that,” Will said, his cheeks pinking up but his smile unrepentant. “I wanted to tell you before the papers made more of the situation than it deserves. Hannibal is working to mitigate the damage as we speak.”

There was a flash of disappointment in Roland’s eyes, his dismay palpable when he asked, “He is not returning?”

“No,” Will said, refusing to allow it to bother him. “Not yet. Things are fragile there still and he has to be sure they are settled. But it is for the best, Grandfather. I have some tenant disputes to settle and several applicants to interview, not to mention overseeing the guest suites and checking the linen situation. Mrs. Henderson found traces of moths. She was nearly inconsolable.”

Roland grinned, tired and vague, his lids growing heavier by the moment.

“I should let you rest, Grandfather,” Will said, disquieted by the understanding that Roland was not as invincible as he always seemed. The idea of Hartford House without his presence was as unwholesome and unhappy as imagining it without Hannibal there. Roland Lecter was Hartford House, in Will’s eyes, and it disturbed him to think that he might never hear the patter of those little feet Will had foolishly promised him so long ago.

“D-did Hannibal… speak to you… about L-Lord Rathmore?” Roland asked, his lids lifting a fraction, resisting the lure of sleep.

“Yes, he did,” Will said. “I would like to take a look at the papers when you’re feeling more alert. My own curious nature compels me; it is nothing that needs to be done just now.”

Roland fumbled his free hand towards his nightstand, gesturing for Will to open it. He did so, releasing Roland’s hand. There was a miniature there, an old portrait of a man who could have been himself, but long and spare, painted facing a youth who was clearly a young version of Roland himself.

“K-keys,” Grandfather wheezed, bringing him back to the task at hand.
Will quickly fished them out, thumbing through them for a small one Roland nodded at. He knew without asking which drawer it unlocked, and found the papers neatly contained.

Roland dozed off while he perused them, and never stirred as Will put everything back where he had found it. He returned the keys to the drawer, unable to resist looking at the miniature.

The pull that Aunt Margaret had spoken of was evident in the painting, an almost elemental force between two people whose family obligations had parted them. It was surreal to see someone so similar to himself looking up from the canvas with limpid blue eyes, as soft and serene as Aunt Margaret had sighed over. There had been no portraits in his childhood home of any relative close to him, which made the miniature all the more precious. The edges of the picture were worn smooth by the brush of fingertips and he imagined Roland gazing at it, stroking the picture with fond fingertips as he recalled the height of their love for one another.

Seeing it, Will wondered if he might ever have something like this of Hannibal and himself, or if Hannibal might enjoy something more appropriate than a garter ribbon to protect him. Several times over the passing years Roland had entreated Will to sit for a portrait to place in the gallery, but Will had always declined. He had never imagined he would be staying, that some proper woman's portrait would take the place of his own.

He found himself warming to the idea, however. The anniversary of their marriage loomed on the horizon, far enough away that there was time to have it tended to.

He tucked the idea to the back of his mind, the rest of his formidable brain digesting the fact that Mr. Brauner, his father's solicitor, was on the list of Mr. Verger's prison visitors.

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Berger returned from Mr. Buddish's office with news that Abigail Hobbs had requested emancipation and the Lord Chancellor was holding an audience with her later that evening to finalize the proceedings.

“And the matter of the Council?” Hannibal inquired, rising from his chair.

“Mr. Buddish says he's doing his best, but it's a blind council,” Berger said, vastly troubled by even the mention of it.

“None of the names are available to the public. He was already gathering information his own self. There’s a whole passel of folks concerned by it.”

“With good reason, Berger, but hopefully between us all we can put a stop to it before it gains too much momentum. Did you ask about Henry?” Hannibal asked, shrugging his shoulders to settle his jacket as he drew it back on. He’d napped some after sending off the courier to Hartford, dreaming of Will and fishing and an ocean of carpets yet to explored. It left him pleasantly fuzzy and content, a feeling he hoped Will could sense despite their distance.

“I did, my Lord,” Berger said. “She takes her stroll as always, right on schedule. I also stopped by the tailors. The bulk of it is finished and being packed to ship tonight. Nichola sends their regards and told me not to worry, they’d see it delivered to Hartford personally in the morning.”

That brought a pleased smile to Hannibal’s face and he hoped Will would be just as outraged as he’d first imagined.

“I wish I were there to see his face,” he murmured, and Berger snorted.

“I reckon you’re safer where you’re at, m’Lord,” he said, grinning. “He’s got himself one glorious temper, though, don’t he?”

“Yes, Berger, he certainly does,” Hannibal agreed, adding with a devilish grin, “and I don’t want to miss a single second of it.”

Berger chuckled, shaking his head, and told him, “I’m very glad you’re finally happy, Lord Clarges. All these years, I was so worried you’d never find it. I hope nothing ever takes that from you, my Lord.”

“It won’t if I can help it,” Hannibal said, but gave his valet and longtime friend a warm smile. “And thank you, Berger. I hope some day you’ll find the same happiness for yourself.”

Berger’s face went red to the tips of his ears and he stammered, “That ain’t a proper wish for a servant, my Lord! Heavens, Mr. Price would cackle like a hyena if he heard you say that! You’d best get yourself to the park! I’ll have a peek in at the Misses.”
Hannibal showed him some mercy and did as he was bidden, amused by Berger’s response but not surprised by it. For a man who mothered everyone in his reach, Berger grew profoundly beside himself when any care was extended his direction, and it never failed to tickle Hannibal pink.

He took himself downstairs and quickly donned his coat, gloves, and hat with Mr. Black’s somber assistance. Within moments he was outside in the weak mid-morning sun and on his way to Kelly Park.

It was just beginning to stir with the fashionable out seeing and being seen. Hannibal hadn’t often taken walks at the acceptable hour, his schedule being too full, but he was recognized and greeted by nearly everyone as he made his unhurried way around the lake.

Henriette of Kirk was installed in a bevy of attentive ladies and a few token guards spared by the royal family. She floated along the path in a spill of tinkling laughter that made Hannibal smile, because there was no one in the world more determined to be carefree than the Lady Withome.

She spied him walking towards her and quickened her pace, calling out, “Hannibal! How worried I’ve been!”

“Good morning, Henry,” Hannibal said, tipping his hat to her and the group at large as they all came to a pause together, “Ladies, good morning to you. I found myself in need of some fresh air and diverting company after a very wearying evening and the gods saw fit to oblige me with a spray of colorful young blossoms.”

Even the oldest among them blushed, their wry smiles indulgent of him. A little flattery, Hannibal knew, rarely did harm and Henry’s acquaintances delighted in being delighted in.

“You scoundrel, don’t you dare attempt to distract us! Bert told me you were very cross with him at the party! How I wish I had gone, but Adele was ill, you see,” Henry said, wasting no time in looping her arm through his and tugging him back the way he’d come. “You should visit the nursery for a check! I cannot tell you how it would relieve me!”

“Henry, my dear,” Hannibal said, covering her slender hand on his elbow with his own, his smile warm. “I would love nothing more than to do so, but I have my hands full just now and I trust the King’s own physician is more than up to the task.”

“Well, naturally, but he isn’t you,” she said, casting a meaningful glance over her shoulder that put a sizable gap between them and her eager attendants. “There, now! I’ve met your spouse, did he tell you?”

“He did,” Hannibal said, tipping his face to the breeze, which blew in from the north and chased the worst of the Capital’s smog away. “But tell me, how do you find him?”

“Beautiful,” she said, a dimple flashing in her cheek as she smiled. “Younger than I expected and nowhere near as solid as Bert was rhapsodizing about. He was quite enchanted, Hannibal, mind that you keep an eye on your mate. You know how Bertram loves a distraction.”

“I’m afraid Will wouldn’t be very agreeable to that, Henry,” Hannibal said, chuckling. “But I am very glad you don’t think he’s brawny.”

“Oh, heavens, no! How terrible! He’s perfectly marvelous,” Henry praised, squeezing his arm with a delighted smile. “And how did he find me?”

“Fascinating and alluring were two observations he made to me,” Hannibal said, angling a look down at her lovely face. It was hard to catch her delicate scent in the breeze, but what he did manage was rather pleasant, melding with her perfume as it was. “I believe the one I should watch is you, my dear. I’ve only just convinced him to like me; it wouldn’t do to lose him so quickly to your formidable charms.”

She rolled her eyes heavenward, well used to his effusive compliments, and asked, “But where is he? Perhaps we might all lunch together!”

“Will has gone on to Hartford in preparation for one of Grandfather’s little parties,” Hannibal said, relaxing in the presence of an old friend. “I had gone on, too, only I was called back for an emergency.”

“Oh?” Henry asked, brows shooting to her hairline as she took a nonchalant glance around them. “Would this have anything to do with the mysterious arrival of a pregnant person to Chelsea House yesterday?”

“Yes, it would, the poor woman,” Hannibal sighed, exchanging polite greetings with a passing group of young men. “We know one another through the medical school I’m backing. She and her wife were walking the grounds with the board and surveyors yesterday evening and she went into early labor.”

“Goodness, how ghastly!” Henry said, paling, her brown eyes widening.
“Indeed it was,” Hannibal agreed, solemn. “They brought her to Chelsea House, naturally, as I am known to them all and it was so near at hand. My staff is instructed to always admit emergency cases; they contacted me as quickly as possible and sent for the midwife.”

Henry pressed her slender, ring-laden hand to her chest, genuinely distressed. “But is she well? How does the child fare?”

“They are both quite well and thriving, only they will have to spend a rather long time here at Chelsea House,” Hannibal confided with a thoughtful frown. “It disturbs me to think how people will gossip. Will would be so hurt by such fallacies and yet it is my duty to help those who need me. I can hardly turn out a family with an early infant when they simply cannot travel.”

“Darling, say no more!” Henry insisted, hugging his arm to her bosom. “I will counter anyone who claims there is anything the least bit improper about this situation! You have my word on that!”

“Thank you, Henry,” Hannibal said, adding with a grin, “I can always rely on you when it comes to parlor gossip.”

She gave him a light slap on his wrist and her lovely nose wrinkled in a frown of annoyance as she said, “How you and Bertram do go on! I will have you know, Lord Clarges, that I am perfectly capable of keeping a secret that deserves being kept!”

“I know you’ve successfully kept one from me, haven’t you?” Hannibal inquired, his grin fiendish with delight when she glowered at him. “As Will pointed out to me.”

“I have done nothing of the sort!” she said, a sniff of disdain accompanying another wrinkle of her nose. “It is no fault of mine that your sense of smell is so appallingly limited when it comes to those around you! Not to mention your terrible attitude, which did little to encourage my confidence! I imagine, had you never reconciled with your lovely little mate, you would have gone to your grave not realizing you kept a secret from yourself where I am concerned!”

“Forgive me,” Hannibal said, and after a moment he tugged on her arm, coaxing, “Henry. Forgive me?”

“You deserve nothing of the sort, you terrible tease!” she said, but relented when he grinned and sighed, “Shame on you, Hannibal. Truly, just shame on you.”

“Believe me, I am thoroughly shamed every time I look at my brilliant mate and realize what I’ve deprived myself of all these years,” Hannibal said, his grin fading to a fond smile. “I do adore him, Henry.”

“You’d better,” she said, squeezing his forearm, “else Bert and I will be wooing him, and you know how happy my husband and I are to make new friends.”

“I’m afraid Will has his hands too full at the moment to offer either one to your cause,” Hannibal said, watching her smile to herself, impish and endearing.

“I spoke to Bertram regarding your Miss Hobbs,” she said, drawing a deep breath of the cool, refreshing air. “He was tasked to assist in the case. He wouldn’t tell me a thing, of course, the wretched man! But the papers seem to think Mr. Hobbs is heading north.”

“North?” Hannibal asked, his stomach sinking with apprehension.

“Yes,” Henry said, nodding with vehemence. “Someone at the train station reported him boarding the northbound; but someone else reported seeing him heading into Eastside, so there really is no telling. People have been seeing him in every shadow and behind every door since the papers first wrote of the case.”

“How long ago did the train sighting occur?” Hannibal asked, unwilling to discount even a rumor of Hobbs heading north.

“A day ago? Two days? I cannot remember just now,” Henry sighed, her brow wrinkling up in thought. “I imagine he is trying to reach the border, don’t you? Bert believes so. I’m sure he’s sent word to every crossing. I shouldn’t like to think of what will happen to Hobbs when he’s found, but I cannot help feeling it’s exactly what he deserves.”

Hannibal’s heart tightened in his chest, uncomfortable and stifled, because surely Hobbs wouldn’t think to go to Hartford...

Where Abigail was born, where Miriam Lass still lived, where Will currently was.

He listened with polite affection while Henry chattered, but his concern grew teeth that bit deep into his heart as he thought about Garret Jacob Hobbs and what he might be planning.

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The moment he returned to Chelsea House, Hannibal hastily wrote a note warning Will and Grandfather that Hobbs could be heading north and to take extra precautions. With Miss Shell making arrangements for a nurse to remain with the Misses
and with Dr. Sutcliffe clearing his schedule to look in on them for the remainder of their stay, he was hopeful he would be home within the next day and able to take personal charge of Will’s security. As reluctant as he was to leave the Misses and their little family so soon, he was no longer a part of what they shared and he was anxious to return to Will’s side. He couldn’t imagine being separated from his mate in any long-term way, not when he missed him so deeply after even so short a time.

“Have this dispatched by courier at once,” Hannibal said, handing it off to Berger with a nervous flick of his eyes. “And hire at least five men from the agency to accompany it. I want them watching the grounds and my mate around the clock.”

“Yes, m’Lord,” Berger said.

“Lord Clarges, there is a caller for you, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, smoothly sidestepping Berger, who rushed out to get the courier and guards onto the earliest train.

Hannibal picked up the card, distracted, and was no wiser when he read the name except that his visitor was a Mr. Clark Ingram from the Ministry of War.

“Put him in the study, Black,” Hannibal said, frowning. He thought of the soldiers moving south and the fall of Ostham and the war that simply would not end, and he grew cold to consider what the Ministry of War might ask of him.

It was a dreadful train of thought, and Hannibal was still somewhat distracted by his worries when Mr. Black admitted him to the study where the rather unsettling Mr. Ingram waited for him.

“Lord Clarges,” he said, rising and offering his hand, which Hannibal only glanced at but did not take. Mr. Ingram dropped his hand but his smile stayed the same, wide and stretched almost like a grimace. “I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice.”

“You have the advantage of surprise, Mr. Ingram,” Hannibal said, gesturing that he should sit. He took his own seat behind the desk and waited, uncertain of what this odd beta man could possibly want of him. “I am a curious creature.”

“I will get straight to the point,” Mr. Ingram said, settling into the chair with both hands neatly folded into his lap. “I come representing the Council for the Betterment of Omegas.”

Hannibal’s brows rose. “Your card informed me you were here on the behalf of the War office.”

“I am an employee of the Ministry of War, Lord Clarges, yes,” Ingram said, ever pleasant. It made Hannibal uneasy, the way he persisted in maintaining that stiff smile and false good cheer. It was downright unnatural. “And the Council is working in conjunction with the Ministry to support and assist Omegas.”

“How odd,” Hannibal breathed, fingers idly tracing the edge of the desk. “As Omegas are not allowed into the military.”

Ingram’s smile cracked just a little with a hairline of menace. “Rules are often broken, Lord Clarges. The Council exists to ensure that Omegas are protected.”

“Protected in what sense?”

“There have been reports, of course, that Omegas have enlisted,” Ingram said, his posture so stiff he might as well have been a ventriloquist doll. “The Council is seeking to locate them and remove them from dangers they simply should not be facing.”

“Remove them,” Hannibal echoed, frowning. “To prison, perhaps?”

Ingram’s smile cracked just a bit more. A flash of something unpleasant bloomed in his black eyes but was quickly stifled by his good sense. “They are breaking the laws which we all must abide by, Lord Clarges. It is our aim to prevent more Omegas from making the same mistakes and finding themselves in places which are hostile.”

“So you seek to make examples of those who have already done so?” Hannibal asked. “Despite the fact that they have fought bravely to keep this country safe while you remain here plotting against them?”

There was a long, pregnant silence before Ingram said, “I was given your name by an officer who served with you, Lord Clarges. He informed me that you would be more than happy to sponsor the Council’s candidate in the elections next term. He gave me the impression that you would be supportive of our efforts to see that there are more solid, specific laws in place for Omegas.”

“For their betterment,” Hannibal said.

Ingram’s smile was wide and tight and toothy. “Yes. For their betterment. They need the protection of their superiors. It isn’t their fault that Nature has denied them the sense to make informed decisions. They are precious and should be protected
as such. The Council will see that they have firm rules in place to guide them and prevent them from engaging in risk-taking behaviors they cannot fully comprehend the impact of.”

A cold, trembling anger snaked its way through Hannibal’s veins. As evenly as he could manage, he asked, “You are aware that my spouse is Omegan?”

“Of course, Lord Clarges,” Ingram said, beaming. “Which will make your endorsement that much more legitimate in the eyes of the voting populace, your dealings with your mate notwithstanding.”

Dealings.

“It might interest you to know that I have no interest in putting Omegas under laws that are even more oppressive than they are at present,” he said, growing increasingly incensed. “Whatever impression my old military colleague has given you, I have no desire to see Omegas shackled to their Alphas’ beds like chattel and this talk of punishing soldiers who have bravely served the Crown is, frankly, indecent. Should such Omegas exist, they have every right to the same decorations and respect that their full-male counterparts are given!”

Ingram just smiled at him, damn the man. Smiled that waxy smile of his and said, “Oh, believe me, Lord Clarges, they exist. The Council is rooting them out as we speak. It is up to you, of course, whether you wish to be part of our work and protect Omegas as they deserve to be protected. I would never presume to tell you your business, but I can say that your past actions and what the Council knows of your personal beliefs are very much aligned with those of our members, and we should be delighted to have you number as one of us.”

‘Let it be the ember which will consume that awful Council in flames...’

Hannibal settled back in his chair, frowning.

“We are having a meeting,” Mr. Ingram said, his fixed smile as empty of life as a doll’s, “Perhaps you might attend?”

“Will all of the members be there?” Hannibal asked.

“Most, save for Lord Reddig, who rarely leaves the countryside,” Mr. Ingram said, giving Hannibal a dull start of surprise to hear Will’s father mentioned. “It will not be a public meeting, of course. Our members value their privacy and it would be... inconvenient were their involvement to be made common knowledge before the election term.”

“Naturally,” Hannibal said, quietly enraged. Even at his worst he had been better than this Council, because at least he had never tried to hide his own prejudice, boorish as he had been. “What time is this meeting?”

“Ten o’clock,” Mr. Ingram said, thoroughly pleased. “It is an informal meeting, of course. Something of a familiarization for new members.”

“Leave the details with Mr. Black,” Hannibal instructed, refusing once more to shake the man’s hand. “I will see if my schedule allows for it.”

If it accomplished nothing else, at least it would supply Mr. Buddish with the names of those who sought to hide their involvement in such sordid dealings, and Hannibal would have a better idea of just what they were up against when he moved to consume that ugly council in flames.

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There wasn’t much time to dwell on the strange discovery he’d made in Grandfather’s papers. Between conducting his interviews, tidying up the work left undone in his absence, and tending to some correspondence, Will found better than half of the day had passed with only tea and a few small sandwiches to sustain him. Seeing Mr. Brauner’s name on Zeller’s list had served to remind him of another letter that had gone missing, however, and he wrote once more to him to recant the contents, explaining that his circumstances had changed and he had no need of such extreme measures.

He gathered up his packets as well as the bundle of correspondence that had been delivered in the afternoon and left the little office, locking the door behind him. The footman who had accompanied him down was nowhere in sight, nor was Winston. Will whistled, wondering if the dog had been taken for a walk, but when Winston came crashing out of the wood line alone, barking with high spirits, Will assumed there had been a miscommunication on his part.

It wasn’t far to the house, however, and he considered himself safe enough on the path armed as he was. He hurried on his way, relieved when he spied Peter out in front of the stables. He raised his hand in greeting, calling out, “Peter! How is Athena? How many puppies did she have?”
He was somewhat taken aback when Peter began to wave both arms over his head in a panic, too frightened to shout back to him.

A split second later the wind shifted, bringing Will the oily scent of rancid lard.

He turned, heart pounding, and found himself face to face once more with Garret Jacob Hobbs.

Chapter 42

A strange calm overcame Will as he stared at the Alpha before him, his senses tuning to survival and eliminating all else. Fear was there, but it was mute, unheeded and unneeded as Garret Jacob Hobbs stopped on the trail.

He was lean with strain, dirty from traveling, jittery with nervous energy that brought a wild light to his eyes. His mouth cracked in a feral smile, the knife in his right hand catching the gleam of the waning sun. The rotten scent of him was cloying, the same sickly-sweet smell that had come from the body he’d left in the woods.

“There’s no Alpha to rescue you this time,” he said, advancing another step, but cautiously, almost uncertain, and it wasn’t due to Winston’s savage barking.

Will was gratified to see his caution, pleased that he could put a thread of wariness in the eyes of this predatory monster.

“I don’t need an Alpha to rescue me, Mr. Hobbs,” he said, his tone bland but unyielding. Winston quieted, growling and bristling at his side. “I think you know that well enough, don’t you? Did you hurt the man who was posted outside?”

Hobbs laughed, an abrupt and sharp noise of half hysteria, but he did not answer.

“Why have you come, Mr. Hobbs?” Will asked, inching backwards, his hand brushing over his pocket where the pistol lay, a heavy and reassuring weight.

“I knew you’d come back eventually,” Hobbs said, nostrils flaring to catch Will’s scent. “That I could come here and take you.”

“Take me?” Will asked, holding eye contact, keeping the knife at the edge of his vision. “For what reason?”

“He took my daughter,” Hobbs said, drawing a rasping breath, the tarry stench of his anger an acrid layer over the rot of his scent. “Put her in that place.”

A Cenobium filled with hundreds of Omegas who would catch wind of him the second he stepped foot on the grounds, a wall of human hearts between him and his goal, watchful and dangerous.

“I want her back,” Hobbs said, cracking his neck and rolling his shoulders as if priming himself for violence.

“You certainly won’t get her back by harming me,” Will pointed out, aware of movement up the trail, most likely Peter rushing for help.

“No, but if I take you,” Hobbs said, his eyes showing white all around, “then he’ll have no choice. If he wants you back, he’ll have to give her to me.”

Will studied him, nose wrinkling at his foul Alpha scent.

“Don’t turn up your nose at me,” Hobbs hissed, his mouth contorting in a snarl.

“I can’t help it,” Will said, cocking his head. “You stink of desperation and fear and despair, Mr. Hobbs. There is no way out of this for you and you know it, we both do.”

“What do you mean?” Hobbs asked, disconcerted by the steady stare Will gave him, by a confidence that seemed out of place in someone who should have been frightened of him, but never had been.

“I have a Gift, Mr. Hobbs,” Will said, his words soft and coaxing. “It’s a very peculiar gift, but it helps me to see things the way other people see them.”

The knife in his hand wobbled, a tremor coursing through him at Will’s words.

“I can see things as you see them,” Will pressed, the soft drone of his voice intentionally calming. “It’s how I knew you were the one who had murdered those girls, Mr. Hobbs. That’s how I showed up in time to stop you. I saw the body in the woods and I knew why you had done it as if you’d whispered it in my ear like a secret.”

“And what do you know now?” Hobbs asked, shaken but determined, lulled despite himself by Will’s confession.
“I know that if you had any hope,” Will said, seeing the cracks within him, the world through the eyes of Garret Jacob Hobbs, a nightmare landscape of cause and consequence, “you would have tried to flee the country. Instead, you came here on some ill-fated, imagined quest to regain your daughter... but we both know the true reason.”

Hobbs stared at him, the snarl fading, the ferocity revealed for what it truly was—fear.

“You hoped to provoke Hannibal into killing you, so you could die with some sliver of Alpha pride,” Will said, chin tipping up in stubborn determination when Hobbs surged towards him. Winston leapt between them, snarling, hackles raised, and Hobbs fell back, echoing the dog’s growl. “To get back at him, perhaps, by killing me and enraging him into a battle you know you won’t survive. But he isn’t here.”

Will slid his hand into his pocket, using the temporary distraction while Hobbs glared down at Winston.

“He’s gone, Mr. Hobbs. There won’t be any exchange for you, no redemption, no reunion with the daughter you tried so hard to love. All you have are the ghosts of the ones you’ve murdered, and me.”

“Shut up!” Hobbs hissed, pointing the knife at him.

“I have had quite enough of Alphas attempting to intimidate me with violence, thank you,” Will informed him, sliding the pistol out of his pocket, cocked and ready. His hand was steady when he aimed it at the man before him, his control unwavering. “Drop the knife.”

Hobbs' lips peeled back to bare his fangs, the sharp teeth of a monster who feasted on children, heavy and wicked. “You’re no murderer, are you Lord Clarges?”

Will’s mouth pursed with disapproval, but his voice was untroubled when he said, “I wouldn’t consider it murder in your case, Mr. Hobbs, but a moral duty. Death and destruction trail in your wake, an anchor of tears and blood and lost potential fixing you to violence.”

Hobbs shook, whether from anger or fear Will couldn’t tell, but he didn’t need to. He could see Garret Jacob Hobbs, the spindly, devouring monster blossoming beneath the skin of a man who had willfully and gleefully obliterated everything he ever loved or held dear out of misplaced terror that he would lose it. A self-fulfilling prophecy embodied, looping in on itself until they were back in this moment—Garret Jacob Hobbs with his knife and Will determined to stop him.

“You’ve realized, haven’t you?” Will murmured, his words carrying on the breeze as the wind shifted again, blowing Hobbs' spoiled scent away from him. “We were never going to take her. She was never going to leave you, not for good. You were the father who raised her, the father she loved. None of this ever had to happen.”

Hobbs howled, the force of the bullet sending him staggering backwards, stumbling. His hand clutched at the bloody stain spreading over his shoulder and the knife dropped from his nerveless fingers, its heavy bone handle hitting the ground with a dull thump. Hobbs rallied and charged even without it, willing to tear Will apart with his teeth if needs be, any semblance of the man he’d once been lost to the monstrosity he had made of himself.

Winston leapt at him, making such a show of ferocity that Hobbs lost his momentum, swaying to the side as blood flowed down his arm with growing force.
“You're going to weaken rather rapidly, Mr. Hobbs,” Will said, reloading the pistol with steady hands as he backed up, putting more distance between them. “I believe I've hit your brachial artery. It was accidental, I assure you. I wanted to disarm you, not put you down.”

He trained the sights on Hobbs' forehead, adding, “But please don’t tempt me.”

“You wouldn't,” Hobbs hissed, spittle-flecked teeth shining in the sun.

“Not for duty, no, you were right about that,” Will said, whistling Winston back to his side and out of Hobbs' reach. “But for Louise? For Abigail? For those children whose lives you stole? For the families you robbed of their daughters? I absolutely would.”

A voice called out to him from up the lane, Zeller racing down with Peter running after him.

“You're as unnatural as I am,” Hobbs whispered, the same words he’d said on the trail back at Marsham Heath when Will had first laid eyes on him. He sank to his knees on the lane and growled, “Pull the trigger!”

“No, Mr. Hobbs,” Will murmured, disdain dripping from his words, his repulsion so thick that Hobbs flinched from it, the last of his willpower lost to him. “I am nothing like you.”

Zeller came to a stop at Will’s side and took in the scene with one sweeping glance. His eyes narrowed beneath his black brows and he said, “It’s just Peter and I, Lord Clarges.”

Will’s mouth tightened, aware of what Zeller was offering with his assurance. It was an opportunity to carry through with no one the wiser for it, but Will meant what he said—he wasn’t like Hobbs, not now, not ever.

“Would anyone remark the gunshot?” Will asked, keeping the pistol level on Hobbs, who was rapidly wilting before them, weakened by the shot to his arm

“I doubt it,” Zeller said, barely panting despite the sprint. He angled a disgusted look Hobbs' direction and said, “I heard it, but I was the only one outside. I was on my way down when Peter snagged me.”

“I-I thought it should be quiet,” Peter offered, nervously looking from Will to Hobbs. “H-His Grace is so ill...”

“You,” Zeller said to Hobbs, stepping forward at Will’s side. “I shot you, got it?”

Hobbs laughed, a bubbling chuckle so eloquent of despair that Will shuddered, sickened.

“And if I say who really did the shooting,” he asked, slumping forward, barely able to staunch the flow of blood down his arm. It splattered the dirt, droplets of bright red soaking into the earth, the last offering of a man who had sacrificed so many before the monster within demanded his life.

“You either do this my way, or I’ll shoot you again,” Zeller suggested, sounding colder and more dangerous than Will had ever heard him, doubly so when he flashed the pistol holstered beneath his unbuttoned jacket. “This time where it’ll kill you a little quicker.”

“I’m dead anyway,” Hobbs said, and loosed a ragged, enraged scream that send Peter and Winston both skittering back in fear.

“You are,” Will said, finding no mercy inside of himself for this man, not after everything he had done. “Make your decision, Mr. Hobbs.”

With a frustrated, impotent snarl, Hobbs tipped sideways into the dirt, ashen and limp. He didn’t stir even when Zeller prodded him with the tip of his boot.

Zeller plucked the knife up and slid it into his boot with the absent ease of habit, the bone handle incongruous against the polished leather.

“Peter, go grab some rope,” he ordered, and tipped a look at Will. “You alright?”

Will nodded, drawing a deep breath heavy with rancid Alpha stench and coppery blood, memories of that moment in the Hobbs cottage returning with the weight of a slap against his soul. He tucked the pistol back into his pocket, the muzzle still warm enough to heat his skin through his clothes.

“You're pale,” Zeller observed, shoving Hobbs onto his back to look at his wound. “Go up to the house, Lord Clarges. I'll take care of this.”

“What will you do with him?” Will asked, feeling as if he should know the fate of Garret Jacob Hobbs, if only so he could whisper it over Louise Hobbs' modest grave.
“Haul him to Chesterton,” Zeller said, using his handkerchief to cover the wound and press on it, compressing the artery with one hand. “Turn him over to the authorities there. They’ll be so glad to have the glory they won’t ask for details. Good thing those ‘wanted’ posters got a good likeness.”

His blue eyes met Will’s with unusual forcefulness, with a competence Will was once more surprised by. There was no trace of his usual lazy, carefree humor in his voice when he said, “No one needs to know about this, especially the old man. And your husband might lock you in the attic for your own safety if he knows what happened here.”

There was a crack of humor at the end, irrepressible after all, and Will nodded, unable to do more than bend his lips in the shape of a smile. It felt waxen and strange, and prompted Zeller to say again, “You should go clean up a bit. You really look ill.”

“I’m fine,” Will said, and that was what bothered him. He was fine. There should be a part of him that was distressed that he had harmed someone, even a vile person like Garret Jacob Hobbs, but he felt no such thing. “I’m just...”

“Shocked?” Zeller offered, lifting the handkerchief to let blood perfuse the arm again.

“Relieved,” Will said, naming the troubling emotion. “I should be upset, I think. That’s the normal reaction to shooting someone, isn’t it?”

“I’m pretty sure any reaction is normal,” Zeller said, stripping Hobbs’ ragged leather belt off of him. He looped it as best he could around the Alpha’s bleeding shoulder, cinching it down over the handkerchief again. “I’d be more relieved if you’d just killed him.”

He shot another look up at Will and added, “There are some threats in the world that just don’t belong there; getting rid of them makes things easier for everyone.”

It gave Will food for thought as he moved to crouch and pick up Winston’s trailing lead, attempting to calm them both. Peter returned at a jog, the requested rope coiled over one arm. With minimal conversation, the two men began to truss Hobbs up like a fair day pig under Will’s watchful gaze. It was surreal to see him caught at last and to know his violence had found an end. It was brutally unfair that one man could cause so much loss and havoc in the world around him, and it made Zeller’s cold observation seem that much more reasonable.

“I’ll need some help,” Zeller said towards the end, and opted for a more circumspect method of getting Will up to the house by saying, “Could you send Jimmy down for me?”

“Yes, of course,” Will said, a tremble of spent adrenaline blossoming through him. He left them to it, hurrying back up the trail towards the House. There was precious little more he could do other than step aside and allow the situation to be dealt with. Zeller, as most long-time staff here, had moved to put the reputation of the House and Lecter family first, taking steps to minimize any potential gossip or conjecture or even stunned horror that might affect them. As a member of the family, Will could do no less and had no desire to be anymore associated with Mr. Hobbs than he already was. He certainly had no desire to bring Hartford and the Lecter name into the spotlight right before Grandfather’s dinner. It would only give the old Alpha one more worry to trouble over, and there was nothing to be gained by anyone knowing Will himself had shot Hobbs.

He loathed the idea of keeping any of this from Hannibal, however, and resolved to write him the moment he had dispatched Jimmy off to help Mr. Zeller.

Jimmy asked no questions. He listened to Will’s succinct explanation and promptly hugged him, a brief squeeze that conveyed mingled relief and rebuke as he he said, “Thank all the gods you had that pistol! Where were your guards?”

“I sent them in search of Mr. Dolarhyde,” Will said, rapidly stripping his jacket off. It stank like spent gunpowder, and in a house with an Alpha there was no way that would go unremarked. “I never dreamed Hobbs would show up here, though I should have known. Gods, I should have known! Of course he would come here! I would have, in his place.”

Jimmy shook his head, bewildered, but said, “I’ll fetch them back.”

“No, Jimmy—”

“I’ll have Zeller send for more men to search for Francis,” Jimmy said, brooking no argument. “My Lord, I can’t go swanning off to Chesterton thinking you might beat another disturbed Alpha out of the bushes while my back is to you!”

His expression of firm insistence was so endearing that Will smiled and nodded. “Of course, Jimmy. Thank you. I’ll be keeping to the house for the rest of the day, I think.”
Jimmy's insistence vanished in concern and he clasped Will's shoulders, asking, “Are you truly alright, my Lord? You always hide so much of what troubles you, I sometimes just can't honestly tell.”

“I am, Jimmy,” Will said, touched by his concern, as he always was. "I'm... absorbing what just happened.”

“You've never had to fire a weapon at a person before,” Jimmy said, frowning. "I hope I'm not getting above myself by saying that you shouldn't let it give you a moment's grief, Lord Clarges. Garret Jacob Hobbs is a monster. The things he did... the things he might've done to you if you hadn't stopped him... it's the stuff of nightmares. Thank all the gods you were carrying that pistol, is all I can say.”

“Thank my husband,” Will said with a wan smile, “who is going to be furious at me for sending my guards off like that. He insists I attract trouble; I'm starting to believe him.”

“Well, you draw as much luck as you do trouble, Lord Clarges, and Hobbs is lucky you found him first," Jimmy pointed out, letting go with a small squeeze before whisking Will's discarded jacket up. He fished the pistol out and laid it carefully on Will's vanity, the barrel pointing away from either one of them. “Though a gunshot might be preferable to a noose.”

“I hope he makes it to the noose,” Will said, unbuttoning his waistcoat. “If only for my own peace of mind. He said I'm as unnatural as he is; I don't ever want to think that's true.”

“It never could be,” Jimmy said, horrified by even the suggestion. “Do you need my help getting set to rights?”

“No, Jimmy, thank you,” Will said, undoing his cuffs. “The sooner you assist Mr. Zeller, the sooner you can return. Mr. Miller was posted outside of the office, but he was gone when I emerged. We'll need to look for him. If Hobbs hurt him—”

“Hobbs didn’t, but I'm going to!” Jimmy said, offended. “He came wandering back over an hour ago! He never breathed a word about staying to escort you!”

“I'm sure Mr. Hawkes will have words with him,” Will said, not envying Mr. Miller the scolding and dismissal he would get. “At the very least, he is unharmed, and that is a weight off my mind.”

Jimmy's frown deepened but he swept out of the room, calling back, “You just take some rest, Lord Clarges, and let us deal with the details. It wouldn't do for you to get out of sorts in your state.”

“My state?” Will echoed, but the door closed quietly behind Jimmy, leaving him with only his bewilderment. He looked down at Winston, who was still somewhat bristled up from all of the frightening things happening, and the dog cocked his head as if to say he, too, was puzzled.

Will discarded his shirt and dressed once more with haste, rushing to his little desk to jot off a note to Hannibal explaining the situation. It served as another way to distance himself from what had happened with Hobbs, commit it to paper as if the story had happened to someone else and they would be the recipient of the strange guilt creeping up through him when he thought of how gladly he'd pulled the trigger.

“If I can catch Jimmy, perhaps it can make the mail car in Chesterton,” Will said, aiming his words at Winston but not speaking to anyone in particular. It was becoming a habit of his to speak aloud to the dog, and Winston was nothing if not an attentive listener. “Then Hannibal will know by this evening—”

He cut off, spying an unfamiliar envelope half tucked beneath the blotter. It was placed in such a way that it begged to be seen, but Will had no idea how long it had been there and Jimmy certainly would never place any of his correspondence in such way.

Will slipped it free and opened it, drawing out a heavy piece of paper covered in graceful, careful script.

There was a note attached, folded over the top corner, a simple acknowledgment from Mr. Buddish stating that this was a copy and the original was filed and recorded with the courts.

**Addendum to a Previous Declaration:**

*Let it be known that the previous Declaration of Ownership of Hartford House is now Amended. As such, Hartford House will no longer belong to William Graham until the time that he bears an Alpha son. From this day, it shall be legally of consequence that on the delivery of any sound, living child of Hannibal Lecter by William Graham, ownership of Hartford House will immediately revert to Hannibal Lecter in its entirety and a legal separation will be filed on his behalf should he so desire. William Graham and his child will remain as guests of Hartford House until the death of Roland Lecter, current Duke of Westvale, after which William Graham's continued occupancy of Hartford House will be strictly by the invitation of Hannibal Lecter.*
He read it twice, and only became aware of his trembling when the words moved before him. He wiped at his eyes with impatience, anger bubbling beneath the surface of his tears, but he composed himself. It wasn’t signed, of course, as it was only a copy, but there were notations to indicate that the original had been signed and dates were added beneath.

It had been signed the day after his fall down the stairs.

The day he had struck Hannibal on the lane.

The day Hannibal had begun to show him such tender care and concern.

The day everything had seemed to take such a turn for the better after being so horribly wrong for so long.

‘Hannibal wants that child, Will. His heir, his little boy. What better way to ensure he gets him than to breed you during your most fertile time...’

Will placed the paper down carefully, his intentions to write Hannibal forgotten. He turned his face to the window, staring with sightless eyes beyond the panes of glass, far past the countryside that stretched in pitches and rolls of green earth.

But no matter how long he stared, he couldn’t see anything past the carefully-printed terms that redefined his understanding of the world in stark black ink.

***

The true purpose for his stay in the city kept Hannibal on task. He found himself back in the Daisy Room to check on Morgan and Alana again before heading to Ingram’s meeting. Margot and the visiting nurse had helped her bathe and she seemed refreshed, if only a little bit pale.

“Well, this is always such a lovely sight,” he said, pitching his voice in a whisper as he let himself in. Marissa was fast asleep between Margot and Alana, her thumb fallen from her slack rosebud mouth. Baby Morgan was asleep at the breast, twitching in little spasms as he dreamed of better days inside his mother’s sheltering womb.

“Miss Shell suggested keeping him in position continuously until he’s put some weight on,” Margot said, reaching across to smooth his fuzzy little head.

“That sounds like an excellent suggestion,” Hannibal agreed, moving to take a seat in the bedside chair. “Dr. Sutcliffe will be here first thing in the morning. I’ll be with him, of course, but I wanted to make sure you were informed. Anything worrisome for you, ladies?”

“Nothing to do with Morgan,” Alana said, smiling when the baby stirred enough to latch on, grunting softly through a few draws before sliding back into sleep. She lifted her gaze to meet Hannibal’s and said, “Only Mason. Has Mr. Tier found him, yet?”

“Oddly enough, there has been no word from Mr. Tier,” Hannibal said, troubled. He rubbed his stomach absently, unable to rid himself of the tight discomfort that had plagued him since this afternoon. It seemed inexplicably linked with a sinking feeling of dread, as if something terrible had happened, or was about to. It made him glad that he’d sent men to watch over Will in addition to the guards Grandfather had hired; at least he could rest easy on that count.

“The men from the unit will have had to go back by now,” Margot said, teasing a stray curl out Marissa’s face to tuck it behind the shell of her ear.

“They have, they left this afternoon,” Hannibal said. “I’ve arranged for men from the agency to guard Chelsea House and accompany you on errands, though I would prefer, Margot, if you would allow the staff to take care of those details.”

He trailed off, a soft frown on his face. “It troubles me that even when Mr. Tier finds Mason, we have no legal recourse to hold him. Without either of you able to testify regarding his actions, there is nothing to charge him with.”

“There might be something,” Alana said, almost hesitant. She looked at Margot, who nodded, and took a deep breath. “Is forgery a chargeable offense?”

“It depends,” Hannibal said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, hands clasped. “What are you referencing?”

“Since we’ve moved to the seaside, I’ve been in contact with my mother,” Alana said, looking down at Morgan and running her finger over his round little cheek. “I found out that while I was married, she’d received letter after letter from me asking for money, which she always sent.”

She frowned, her upset apparent on her pretty face.

“I never wrote to her, Hannibal,” she said, solemn. “Not once. But she saw the letters and believed they were from me.”
“You believe Mason forged them,” Hannibal said, seeing the lay of her thoughts. “Could he do such a thing?”

“Absolutely,” Margot confirmed, curling up a little closer to her wife and tucking Marissa warmly between them. “Mason could forge anyone’s handwriting, all he needed was a sample with a signature. He falsified a fortune in father’s cheques in the Capital before the bank closed the account. Papa thought it was clever of him, of course, and refused to punish him for it.”

“How much did your mother send?” Hannibal asked.

“Five thousand, almost six,” Alana said, blinking rapidly against tears. “Is that enough? Enough to bring charges?”

“Well will she do so?” Hannibal asked, concerned. “If she fears a scandal—”

“Oh, she’ll do so,” Margot said, nodding. “She’s waited a long time to reconnect, Hannibal. She’s spent years thinking Alana had taken advantage of her, never knowing the truth of the situation. Furious doesn’t quite do her justice.”

“That is very good news,” Hannibal said, hastily correcting, “Not the circumstances, but the fact that we would have viable charges to raise, should Mr. Tier bring him in alive.”

Margot’s brows rose and she echoed, “Should?”

“I’d rather he didn’t,” Alana said, hugging Morgan cautiously. “I’d rather Mr. Tier fed every inch of Mason to those dogs of his. I just want to be free of him, Hannibal. I just want us to be able to live without worrying about him every second of every day.”

“I want that for you, too,” Hannibal said, reaching out to smooth her hair before squeezing Margot’s fingers. “And I am very happy to hear that you’ve spoken with your family. I’m sure they are eagerly anticipating meeting their grandchildren and their new daughter.”

Alana nodded, smiling, and Margot slid her arm a little closer around her, warm and protective.

“When we can travel, we’re going to stay there, I think,” Alana said. “She invited us to stay as long as we’d like, and my father’s men will be happy to keep watch over us. She was appalled to know the lie we’ve been living under and so angry about what Mason... what he did to us.”

“I think that is a wonderful idea,” Hannibal said, drawing back with a smile. “Naturally, I’ll assist you in any way I can. It will do all of you some good to go, to be sure. Home and family are a blessing to those who are lucky enough to find them.”

He thought of Will, of course, a soft, absorbed smile curving his sculpted lips. His sassy, violent, incredible mate, his brilliant, dangerous, beautiful wolf—his home, his family, his soul mate, waiting to cosh him with a table were he delayed in his return.

The strange feeling twinged in his gut again, a surety that all was not well somehow, even though he knew he couldn’t tell such a thing. Will had been certain the bond didn’t work that way, but that didn’t rule out instinct and intuition, and it filled him with a restless anxiety to get home.

“Tomorrow can’t come fast enough, can it?” Margot teased, smiling.

“No,” Hannibal agreed, coaxed into an answering smile despite his unease. “Every moment I’m away from him is painful. I’ll be very glad to get back home. But he would be very thoughtful were I to leave you before ensuring all was well.”

“Thoughtful?” Alana asked, confusion wrinkling her brow.

“Thoughtful,” Hannibal confirmed, grinning, “because my mate has informed me he is never cross and I would never dare contradict him.”

It left them smiling, falling into quiet, private murmurs that teased Hannibal’s ears on his way out. He dreaded attending any event associated with that awful Council, but he had a debt to pay and he had promised himself he would see it paid in full.

###

There was a dangerous unbalance within Will as he sat before the fire in his suite, idly stroking Winston’s head. It was the sway of a pendulum gaining force, moving rapidly between disbelief and cold consideration. His thoughts refused to solidify even hours later, as if his mind could not bring form to the deep hurt and confusion he felt.

‘When you do make your decision formally, I will be the happiest man in the world should you still find in my favor. If you decide otherwise, just know that it will never change my feelings for you. I do love you to distraction, Will Lecter-Graham...’
“Will?”

He started, surprised by his sister’s soft call so near. Winston chuffed a soft woof of greeting as Mina approached, a look of acute concern on her face.

“I’m sorry, Mina, I was... thinking,” he said, finding it hard to disengage from his heavy numbness.

“I knocked and heard Winston,” she said, her tone cautious as if he might do something unpredictable or dangerous. “I assumed you were woolgathering. Pardon me for intruding.”

“It’s no intrusion, Mina,” Will said, his smile distracted. “Did you need something?”

“I thought I would check on you,” she said, coming closer to smooth his hair, all traces of viciousness drowned beneath the warmth of her touch. “You missed dinner. The Misses Trenton were so disappointed not to see you.”

“Forgive me, I’ve been... busy with work,” Will said, a glance at the mantle clock showing him he’d been sitting for nearly three hours in stunned silence while his mind turned the issue over and over, finding all the sharp edges to cut his certainties upon.

“You look very unsettled,” Mina remarked, cupping his chin to tip his head up to her gaze. “Has something distressed you, darling?”

“Nothing worth speaking of,” Will said, hoping she wouldn’t press the issue.

Mina frowned, knowing his placid gaze hid a world of secrets from her, but she only said, “Gretchen will be up any moment with some tea, and just in time, too, by the look of you. I thought we might share a cup and relax before bed? I have a new book of philosophy from the Continent. I could read to you, if you like?”

“That is very kind of you, Mina,” Will said, knowing it was far too late to get a message to Hannibal now and he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to. The future he had settled his faith in felt brittle and thin as glass laced with hairline cracks, awaiting the lightest of pressures to shatter into a thousand jagged pieces. He struggled against that feeling with everything in him, because surely, there was some mistake?

There simply had to be a mistake, because nothing Hannibal had said to him was a lie. He only needed answers to help him understand what had prompted such a cruel agreement and why Hannibal had never spoken of it to him when he professed to love Will so very much.

So very much that Will awoke in the middle of the night awash in tender tears and smiling. So very much that Hannibal knelt at Will’s feet and whispered feverish odes to his knees as he kissed his bare skin. So very much that he swore it made no difference if Will could provide him an heir or not, as long as Will would remain at his side.

The treasure he hoarded, the love he was greedy for, the husband whose touch he craved and whose mind he adored...

“Is this what has you so unhappy, my dear?” Mina asked, plucking the paper up before Will could stop her, his momentary distraction making him slow.

“A knock came at the door, Miss Speck’s cheerful voice calling, “Service, your Ladyship!”

“Bring it in, Gretchen,” Mina said, retreating to the opposite side of the room while Will watched, thwarted in retrieving it as Mina’s maid bore in a tray. “Set it by the fireside and light some of the lamps, Gretchen, it’s like a cave in here! And build that fire up, dear. It’s always so chilly inside. That valet of yours has no care with you, Will, I swear it.”

Will silently moved to resume his seat before the fireplace, chewing his lower lip, deeply distracted as Miss Speck went about lighting lamps and expertly building up the fire.

A knock came at the door, Miss Speck’s cheerful voice calling, “Service, your Ladyship!”

“Anything else, my Lord?” she asked Will, turning the tea tray just a hair to the left to center it.

“That will be all, Gretchen,” Mina said for him, moving to sit in the opposite chair, still clutching the paper in her hand. She turned it towards the firelight, growing disbelief furrowing her brow in eerie echo of Will’s own frown.

The door closed without a sound behind Miss Speck, leaving the pair of them alone in silence. Winston lounged on his belly before the fire, his back legs stretched long in a pose that might’ve coaxed Will to chuckle at any other time, but certainly not now.

“Will,” Mina said, her voice small now with sad regret. “I am sorry.”

“For what?” he asked, refusing to look at her, refusing to see any satisfaction at all on her lovely face.
“They have conspired against you,” she said, glancing down at the paper again, as if rereading the contents would rearrange the words into something understandable.

It wouldn’t, Will knew. He’d spent hours trying.

“This certainly explains things.”

“Does it?” Will asked, distracting himself by pouring for them both. It was the same bitter brew Mina had pressed on him last time, but Miss Speck had provided a brimming sugar bowl and Will made vigorous use of it.

“This just confirms my fears, Will,” Mina said, her voice falling to a whisper. “He does not care about you in the least! He has used you, and badly, and you, silly thing that you are, have allowed it! You are weak, William, weak. It is fortunate for you that I am here to look after your interests. They have treated you abominably! I could never bear such shame.”

Will gulped his tea, breathing through the pain of her words, everything in him rising up in opposition to her opinions.

“Ignorance of a situation isn’t cause for shame, Mina,” Will said, grimacing and adding another spoonful of sugar to the tea. “I was kept ignorant of an agreement which directly affects me and now I find myself informed, for whatever it’s worth.”

“They saw fit to deceive you!” Mina said, shaking the paper for emphasis. “How can you ever trust any of them again?”

‘I can’t,’ was the answer she seemed to be looking for, condemnation for his husband, for Grandfather, who had wanted a child and damn the rest, even Will himself by making his place at Hartford dependent on Hannibal’s whim.

“You’re expected to deliver your own ending,” Mina said, her tea untouched. “Hannibal will finally have everything he wants—Hartford House, his mistress to live here with him, a child to please his grandfather, and no unbearable Omega darkening his doorstep. And all you will get is shown the door!”

Will’s mouth thinned, a heavy breath leaving him and a fine tremble coursing through his taut body. Arguments coalesced, clarification, moments his mind had spent the last few silent hours amassing without his direct awareness.

“What a vicious repayment for what you’ve managed for them,” Mina murmured, sliding the paper onto the tray and taking up her teacup. “What ugly means they stooped to in order to get their precious child, making a fool of you with plans to cast you off into the world. They lack respect enough for you to even bother hiding it from you! You mean so little to them, Will. You mean nothing at all.”

“That,” Will said, the word escaping him on a deep exhale, “is not true, Mina.”

“It isn’t?” she asked, tipping her cup to her lips with no sign she found it bitter.

Will took up the paper, reading it again aloud, adding at the end, “This agreement was struck the day we left Hartford House.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Mina said, refilling Will’s teacup and adding as many heaps of sugar as he had the first time.

“Before Hannibal confessed he loved me,” Will said, the straining upset he’d felt beginning to calm at last as he considered it all in context. “Before we even shared my heat. He had no way to know that it would even happen, Mina. I didn’t know I would; it took us both by surprise.”

“Perhaps he assumed close quarters would bring it about?” she suggested, taking up her position opposite him, not from malice but from games they had played as children—debating an issue to win an argument.

“Hannibal has virtually no understanding of being an Alpha,” Will said, sipping the tea with reluctance. “Less so, even, than I have of being an Omega. I cannot say he would think of such a thing, or believe it to be true even with coaching.”

“So you don’t imagine he spirited you away to monopolize you?”

“I am the one who made the decision to leave Hartford,” Will said, his heart settling its pace. “He couldn’t have anticipated that, either.”

“Unless he is the one who pinned the note to the door?” Mina suggested.

“Possible, but unlikely,” Will said. “He has no patience for deceit and no reason to take me from Hartford for that. And then there is the matter of the child.”

“The child you think you might not be able to bear him?” Mina asked.

“I confessed it and he said it didn’t matter. There was no hesitation in him, Mina, none,” Will said, his spirits not quite as heavy now. “He assured me that it makes no difference, that all he wants in the world is to be at my side and should I never bear his children, it will never change his love for me.”
“Will, he’s a doctor,” Mina said, placing her cup back down. “Even with rudimentary knowledge of or dealings with Omegas, he would know the common side effects of the medications you used and know they are rare.”

“He gambles on the chance that I might get pregnant?” Will asked, frowning when Mina nodded. A fine sweat broke out on his brow, almost as if he was feverish. “Yet I can feel his sincerity through my bond to him, Mina. Everything—everything he has said—is true.”

“He could be manipulating the bond,” Mina suggested, “When did he first confess his love to you, Will? Before or after you explained to him how it works?”

Will hesitated, his stomach tightening on a sudden roil.

“After,” he admitted, abandoning his cup and shaking his head when she moved to fill it. “It was after, but it matched what I felt before he was aware of the bond, Mina. It isn’t possible for him to manipulate the bond because it only goes one way. I cannot explain it, I wish I could, but I know without a shadow of a doubt that Hannibal Lecter loves me and would do everything in his power to keep from hurting me.”

The fragility that had threatened him vanished as the bond swelled within him, a soft murmur like a lover’s whisper bringing with it the presence of his husband along with the sense memory of his Alpha scent.

“Be that as it may,” Mina said, unconvincing. “He and His Grace saw fit to draw this Addendum up behind your back and neither of them felt they should mention it to you. How on earth did you even come into possession of that horrid thing?”

“It was left for me,” Will said, frowning, rubbing at the headache that blossomed behind his eyes. “Somehow, someone got hold of private documentation that should never have gone astray and saw fit to leave it here for me to find.”

“How very troubling,” Mina murmured, staring at the fire. “I saw staff in and out of here all afternoon. It could have been anyone at all.”

“Certainly someone who thinks driving a wedge between Hannibal and I will accomplish something,” Will said, his hand trembling as he lowered it. “Perhaps the ones who threatened my life have a new goal in mind and seek to part me from Hannibal.”

“Whoever they are, you should thank them,” Mina said, and when Will looked sharply at her, she shrugged her slender shoulders and said, “If you aren’t pregnant, Will, then you keep Hartford House. Now you know why he set aside his tastes and shared your heat under false pretenses! All of his assurances that he wants to spend his life with you were merely a way to lull you into compliance and allow him his way with you! Clearly, his only interest is in getting you with child. What a goad this agreement must be, inspiring him to be so deceitful.”

She turned her dark gaze to his, lowering her voice to a purr to whisper, “You have an opportunity not to fall victim to their schemes, Will. You can deny him access to your bed, to your body, and remain in control of Hartford House until he accounts for these terrible actions he’s taken against you!”

“Oh, he will account for it, Mina,” Will said, determined. “But there is every chance he hoped I would never find out about it.”

“I imagine so!” she said, wrinkling her nose in annoyance. “No doubt he was waiting for a child to be born before he waved that paper in front of your face like a flag of victory! I truly wouldn’t stand for it, were I you. I would throw Hannibal out in a heartbeat and pray I was not pregnant! You should speak with His Grace about this and demand an explanation!”

“No one demands anything of a Duke, Mina,” Will said, reconsidering taking the issue to Grandfather and asking for answers. He would, no doubt, write immediately to Hannibal warning him of what had happened, and that didn’t suit Will in the least. “I prefer to speak with Hannibal about this privately, without involving Grandfather. If Hannibal doesn’t give me answers that I feel are honest, then I will ask His Grace to settle the matter for me.”

“It makes me nervous to think that they are capable of such duplicity,” Mina said, trembling in a light shudder, “as if I do not know them at all. What an awful, ugly thing to do!”

“This,” Will said, turning the paper in his hand, “is cruel but ultimately meaningless, Mina. Hannibal has said time and again that if I wish him to go, he will go. Over and over he has told me that he desires to stay with me, but only by my choice. Every moment I have spent with him contradicts what is written here in every conceivable way. This document was signed before anything of true import occurred between us, perhaps when Hannibal still harbored resentment against me for the disposition of Hartford House.”
Mina watched him, an avid glitter in her eyes as she gauged his reaction, as if something of great importance hinged on his certainty.

“Everything between us happened after this paper was signed,” Will insisted, “but not because of it. If his only desire was to regain Hartford House, he didn’t need to fall in love with me to reach his goal. Hannibal says it is always mine to choose, and I choose to believe in him. I choose to have faith in him and in the strength of his love for me. This paper means nothing, not anymore, except as a way to make me question my own judgment and Hannibal’s sincerity.”

“And do you?” Mina asked, acute concern on her face, a sympathy for him often buried beneath habitual pettiness that Will had long since grown used to.

“No,” Will said, the admission filling him with peace. “No, Mina, I do not. I’m furious that this Addendum exists, I’ll acknowledge that much, but there is a world’s worth of difference between the man who signed this paper and the man I—”

Mina’s brows rose and she cocked her head, noting the sudden flush that overcame him when he cut himself off so abruptly.

“Love?” she offered, bringing his sentence to its intended close. “Love is blind, they say. Let’s hope in your case it isn’t blinding you to the truth.”

Will subsided, the flush raising another sweat on his brow. His stomach lurchet, not agreeing with Mina’s tea in the least.

“Are you unwell, dearest?” Mina inquired, taking note of his discomfit. “Will, you look quite ill. Not that I’m surprised. This really has been a shock, no matter your protestations. Perhaps you should rest, hm? Come, let’s get you changed into something comfortable and I’ll read to you. How does that sound?”

Will nodded, hot and somewhat queasy. But it wasn’t Mina he reached out to for comfort, it was his bond. He reached for the surety he found there, for the vibrant strength of his husband’s Alpha essence, and for the warmth of Hannibal’s love. A love that everything within him knew simply could not be a lie.

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The Council for the Betterment of Omegas convened in the private meeting hall above a club Hannibal was not a member of. There was a back entrance, however, which Berger took up a post just inside of, frankly and openly disapproving of the whole process.

“Chin up, Berger, it’s for a good cause,” Hannibal reminded him, doffing his gloves and hat to hand them off to an attendant.

Berger snatched them away and brushed the top of Hannibal’s hat off as if the bewildered attendant had gotten it dirty, his cheeks pink with affront.

“Good cause or no, my Lord,” he said, taking Hannibal’s coat and walking stick for good measure, standing like the world’s most aggrieved coat rack near the door. “It gives me hives to think of the Lecter name even being associated with such a place! The sooner you’re done, the sooner we’re gone, and good riddance to bad rubbish.”

It brought a reluctant but helpless smile to Hannibal’s lips that lingered as he made his way inside.

There were more people present than he’d first imagined and far more than he had feared. They stood in clumps of conversation, sipping from drinks and smoking pipes as if about to settle down for a card game.

He only wished it was something so benign.

“Lord Clarges, I am honored you came,” Mr. Ingram said, striding over to greet him but very pointedly not offering his hand and Hannibal made no move to extend his own.

“I came for the sake of curiosity, Mr. Ingram,” he said, aware that conversation had mostly fallen silent as his arrival was marked. It was not arrogance, but understanding that as the future Duke of Westvale he was a man with considerable power and would no doubt be courted by their council with a passion. “Consider me an observer. I should like to see how you conduct yourselves before I make any sort of decision regarding my affiliation with your cause.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Mr. Ingram said, that fixed and unsettling smile pasted on his empty face. He made a sweeping gesture at the assembled chairs and said, “Shall we?”
As Mr. Ingram took his place before them, Hannibal made careful note of the people around him, all of whom were signing some sort of ledger as they filed in to sit. Hannibal gave it a cursory glance and moved to the back of the room without signing it.

As Mr. Ingram spoke, it very quickly became apparent that the Council for the Betterment of Omegas wanted nothing more than to see Omegas reduced to chattel, for lack of a better word. Hannibal held his silence with difficulty, listening to Mr. Ingram wax eloquent on his points and the Council’s mission, watching heads nod in confident agreement as superior glances were exchanged. It burned like a coal in his belly, a knot of anger half self-reproach because without Will’s influence, without his mate’s patience and determination to show him the truth, he would be there among them and he well knew it.

“And I am very pleased to welcome Lord Clarges to our meeting,” Mr. Ingram said, the entire focus of the room shifting to pin Hannibal with unblinking stares. “I hope hearing the core values of our Council has helped to sway you in our favor, my Lord.”

Hannibal straightened, asking, “May I?”

“Yes, please,” Mr. Ingram said, his mouth stretched in that permanent, frightening smile. He made a welcoming gesture as he stepped aside, offering Hannibal his place.

Hannibal made his way to the front of the room and looked at them carefully, his critical amber eyes sweeping each of them in turn.

“I came here tonight from curiosity,” Hannibal said, the natural projection of his Alpha voice sending a rumble through the room. “I wanted to see the faces of the men who feel their view of the world, narrow as it is, is the only one that counts in our society.”

There was a small stir of consternation, but no real alarm.

Not yet.

“An associate of mine in the military suggested you seek my support to further your cause,” Hannibal said, ignoring Ingram’s uncertain bid to gain his attention. “An associate who no doubt experienced my opinion of Omegas firsthand on the front. Flighty, flirty, empty-headed, and vain little butterflies, only good for decorating parlors and keeping Alphas satisfied. Simplistic, self-absorbed children lacking the capacity to make decisions without an Alpha to instruct them.”

That garnered nods, smug and self-satisfied, the congratulatory posturings of outdated ideals, the frantic grasp at waning power and the reflexive fear of change.

“I am well aware that I have never made a secret of my opinions,” Hannibal said, smoothing his hand down his jacket to feel the bump of his pocket watch, the links of the chain and the soft ribbon of Will’s garter less distinct, but still bolstering him. “It is a well-known fact that I lack any sort of discretion when it comes to my personal beliefs, and so I have no cause to hold myself back now, either.”

“That is to the good, Lord Clarges,” one of the men called, the words accompanying puffs of smoke from his pipe. “We need more men with political power, outspoken men of solid faith and understanding, if we’re to accomplish our goals.”

“Yes, your goals,” Hannibal said, pacing slowly before them. “Root out Omegas in the military and use their disobedience as an example of their foolishness, which will sway public opinion into believing Omegas require even less freedom than beta females currently have. I ask you, gentlemen, to what end? Hm?”

He paused, making hard eye contact with each as he swept the room. “What precisely do you feel so threatened by? What do you fear they will take from you? Rather, what have they withheld from you that you feel you are owed, and now seek to punish?”

There was uncomfortable shifting. No few pairs of eyes dropped when he looked at them, not chastened, but outraged that he would dare to name it.

“Choices, gentlemen?” Hannibal asked, cocking his head. “That they are free to choose, and thus you are deprived of choosing for them in your own favor?”

“Now, see here, Lord Clarges—”

“You will hold your tongue when your betters address you,” Hannibal said, a low Alpha rumble making his words echo. “And believe me, I am your better. I wasn’t always so. I was once blinded by irrational fears, by hatred, by a childish self-
importance that kept me willfully ignorant of the truth everyone around me could see. People died for it. Omegan soldiers died for it, because their fear of my prejudice prevented them from seeking my aid on the battlefield.”

There was another soft, shocked murmur, as if none of them had truly believed there might be Omegas at war, as if all of this was some grand game, a ready excuse with an ultimate goal of affecting things here at home.

“Your concern for their welfare is overwhelming,” Hannibal said, his nose wrinkling in a snarl, “considering you exist for their betterment.”

He squared his shoulders, stretching to the fullness of his not inconsiderable height, every inch the haughty Alpha, every bit the Lord he was.

“I have had the benefit of an education in my marriage, courtesy of my Omegan husband,” Hannibal told them, his chin tilting up in unconscious pride. “I have learned the error of my foolishness and have seen myself reflected in a way that fundamentally changed the person I am, the beliefs I hold, my entire understanding of the world. I do not expect such enlightenment will find its way to you. If I were to pray, however, I would pray for such a thing, because once upon a time I would have proudly sat among you rather than in judgment of you.”

The silence that followed was deafening, offended and shocked.

“I came here tonight to satisfy my curiosity, and it is satisfied,” Hannibal said, not bothering to mask his disdain. “I find myself surrounded by cowards who sit in private rooms and congratulate themselves on their moral superiority while there are soldiers dying on the Continent, some of whom spend every moment terrified that they will be discovered and court-martialed because meddlesome fools like you feel anyone with the capacity to bring a life into this world somehow lacks the courage to end one!”

Mr. Ingram paled, as did several others in the room. Some were florid with anger, impotent and embarrassed to have their personal beliefs scorned.

“I know you, gentlemen,” Hannibal said, his smile tight and small and menacing. “I know your spouses, your children, your families as a whole. Omegan wives, Omegan children, Omegan mothers. And yet you sit here plotting to take from them their right to exist on an equal footing with you. What would they think of that, I wonder? What did you plan to tell them when your grand design takes shape? Will you comfort them as they cry, knowing that you are the ones who drove these restrictions into place? Will you tell them what you tell yourselves? Hm? That’s for their own good?”

His words died with a harsh echo, anger flushing his cheeks.

“Perhaps what is needed is an example,” he purred, and plucked up the ledger they all had signed. He closed it, gratified to see the panic that filled every face before him as he tucked it into his pocket. “I will have this booklet delivered to print come morning. I ask no more of you than you do of the Omegas you seek to subjugate—that you trust me to know what is best for you, gentlemen. After all, this is for your own good.”

He cast one last dismissive glance at them and swept out of the room, still trembling with a fury he could barely contain.

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Hannibal’s anger kept him so warm he felt feverish, that sinking feeling in his stomach abating somewhat but still present, a looming sense of bad tidings he simply couldn’t shake. He stalked down the dark street to the coach with Berger just behind him, both of them somewhat grim.

“Where to, m’Lord?”

“The Buddish residence,” Hannibal answered, climbing into the coach as Berger clambered up behind. “And be quick about it.”

He closed his eyes as the coach jostled on its way, thinking of all the things he should have said to those men, things Will would have said, points his level-headed, controlled spouse would have made to shear them down to their bones. Will’s violence wasn’t solely contained in his propensity for coshing people, after all. His tongue was as much a weapon as any sword and Hannibal wished he’d come armed with his mate’s quick wit and Gift to truly make his point to those insufferable, self-aggrandizing peacocks.

The Buddish residence was lit, the shadows beyond the curtains speaking to a social event. Hannibal had a fleeting regret for interrupting, but he was pleased he wouldn’t have to rouse their hard-working solicitor from his bed.
The door was answered by one of the maids, who seemed a little skeptical when Hannibal’s footman insisted Lord Clarges needed to speak with Mr. Buddish. Impatient, Hannibal slid out of the coach and mounted the stairs, arriving at the door just as Mr. Buddish did.

“This man says he’s—”

“Thank you, Tansy, you can go back in,” Mr. Buddish told her, hastily urging her back so he could close the door, hoping to keep the visit private, exposed on his stoop as they were. He offered Hannibal a sheepish smile and said, “I wouldn’t presume to invite you in.”

“I wouldn’t presume to intrude on your party,” Hannibal said, fishing the book from his jacket. “This is a list of Council members, established as well as new. I want you to copy it down and have the book delivered to someone at the paper you trust.”

Mr. Buddish took it with surprise evident on his face, his dark eyes filled with confusion. He nodded, however, and asked, “Is your name here?”

“I didn’t sign it, but it might be,” Hannibal said. “If someone added it in an excess of confidence. I have no qualms having my name published with this information, provided my stance against the Council and my reasons for attending are made crystal clear. If there is even a hint that I may have gone in support of this wretched Council, I will buy that paper outright and bury it so deep no one will remember it was ever in print.”

Mr. Buddish looked properly awed and nodded, tucking the book into his jacket and patting his pocket repeatedly as if he feared misplacing it.

“I thought perhaps you might’ve come because you’d gotten my message,” he said, making Hannibal cock his head in confusion. “Word came this evening on the last train. Hobbs has been caught.”

Relief flooded Hannibal with such force that he swayed on his feet, eyes closing briefly as he whispered a sigh of gratitude to the heavens.

“Where was he caught?” he asked, wetting his dry lips, his amber eyes sliding open again.

“In Chesterton, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, sending a pulse of shocked fear surging through Hannibal’s gut. It faded, however, when he added, “A constable there shot him earlier this evening. He’s very badly hurt, I’ve been told, and they are waiting to move him, but he is in custody.”

“And hopefully well guarded,” Hannibal said, darkly thinking of Hobbs and his ferocious tenacity.

“A contingent of Capital police took the last train out, according to what I’ve heard tonight,” Mr. Buddish said, eager to allay his worries. “They are hopeful to bring him in come morning.”

“Thank you, Mr. Buddish,” Hannibal said, able to give a true smile at last. “It is a huge weight off of my mind that he got no further than Chesterton. I had the strangest feeling he was attempting to reach Hartford.”

“Retribution, my Lord?” Mr. Buddish asked, frowning. “Very lucky for us all that he never made it so far. I have written His Grace and sent a courier, but it will no doubt be dawn before he arrives. Still, you can rest easy knowing Hartford will not fall under any sort of danger from Mr. Hobbs.”

“I truly appreciate all your hard work, Mr. Buddish,” Hannibal said, smiling at the pleased surprise on Mr. Buddish’s face. “Please, enjoy your party. I will see you come morning.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said. “And may you have a lovely evening.”

Buoyed by the knowledge that Hobbs was in custody and Will was soundly protected, Hannibal hastened back to Chelsea House, eager to pass the night and welcome the dawn of his return home.

Chapter 43

For the first time in a very long time, Will thought he might be falling ill.

He woke nauseous and still a bit shaky, bleary-eyed as if he’d had too much wine to drink the night before. His bed was empty, no sign of Winston anywhere, and the light through the windows spoke of it being much later than he first thought.
Jimmy came in with Winston trotting at his heels and he promptly moved to get Will’s dressing gown. There was already a fire burning in the fireplace and despite his usual refusal to be coddled, Will was grateful for it. There was a chill he couldn’t seem to shake, and he was reluctant to leave the meager warmth of his bed to start his day.

“Good morning, my Lord,” Jimmy said, bundling Will up in the dressing gown the moment he rose. A pair of bedroom slippers hitherto unworn met Will’s toes as he gained his feet, surprising but too pleasant to protest. “Winston was very anxious to do his business when I came in to check on you, so I had one of the boys take him for a run down to the village. He’s already had his breakfast, as well.”

“Heavens, I slept so late,” Will breathed, rubbing the remnants of a headache away from his temple. “You should have roused me, Jimmy.”

“There’s no harm getting some rest for a change, my Lord,” Jimmy said, tying his dressing gown snugly at his waist. “The work isn’t going anywhere and the House is in chaos getting things ready.”

Will winced, still dreading the gathering to come, entirely unprepared to see his father again after all of these years.

“When did you get back last night?” he asked, curious and wishing to change the subject.

“Late,” Jimmy said, moving swiftly to the hallway to fetch a rolling cart. “You were tucked up in bed when I checked on you, safe and sound. You must be more careful about locking your suite, however, my Lord.”

“Mina doesn’t have a key; she was here with me last night,” Will said, vaguely recalling the book she’d read to him. “I was more tired than I realized; I don’t even recall falling asleep. Did you have any trouble in Chesterton?”

“Not a bit,” Jimmy said, beaming at him. “Everything went flawlessly. The constables in Chesterton were more than happy to take custody of Hobbs with no questions asked. The likeness on those posters was simply uncanny.”

“And was he stable?” Will asked, knowing Hobbs had lost quite a lot of blood.

“Stable enough to put up a fuss,” Jimmy said, getting things situated. “But he couldn’t do much in his state. The doctor there said he’d live long enough to drop on the scaffold. More’s the pity the families of those girls can’t have him.”

“I imagine not even that could ease their pain,” Will mused, idly stroking Winston’s head, struggling to wake up. “Has there been any word from Chelsea House?”

“No, but all things considered, we’re more likely to get Lord Clarges in return rather than a letter,” Jimmy said, setting out a small but luxurious brunch on the little tea table near the window. It was the same table where Will and Hannibal had taken breakfast the morning they’d left Hartford House for Marsham Heath.

Will took his seat with the ghostly memory of Hannibal seated across from him, his beautiful face turned to the window as he purred, ‘I have caused you quite enough pain, Will...’

If only he’d spoken then of the Addendum he’d signed the very day before. If only Will’s knowledge of its existence would cease trying to taint his memories with “what if”.

“I’m curious to see what the papers will say of it,” Jimmy said, lifting the lid from the tray. “We’ve been getting them the same day, recently. That railway has made the Capital feel so close! It’s just amazing to think how quickly information can travel these days.”

The scent of ham and eggs hit Will’s nose like a punch to his unsettled stomach and he jerked backwards, hand flying to cover his face.

“Good gods!” Jimmy gasped, instantly putting the tray lid back on and hurrying to the washroom. He returned in seconds with a cloth and urged Will’s hand down, replacing it with the cloth.

Lavender oil countered the fatty scent of the ham and Will drew a deep, grateful breath, waving his hand in silent pleading for the tray to be taken away.

“Gracious, my Lord, I am so sorry!” Jimmy said, abjectly upset that he had inadvertently caused Will distress. He put the offending tray back on the cart and rolled it out into the hallway, leaving only the tea.

“I believe my sister’s tea disagrees with me,” Will said, his words muffled by the cloth. He lowered it cautiously, testing the air as Jimmy cracked the window. The cool breeze chased the last of the scent away and he drew another deep breath, his stomach calming. “Whatever it is, I would very much appreciate if it made no more appearances in my presence.”

“His Grace dislikes it, too,” Jimmy said, pouring Will a glass of water to take with his tea. “Zeller has him off of everything now but honey water, goat milk, and porridge. Perhaps I should do that for you?”
“No, thank you, Jimmy,” Will said, closing his eyes as the air rushed over him, easing the fine sweat on his brow. “Just some toast, perhaps? And please be sure to tell Mrs. Pimms that this is no criticism of her cooking, which is always excellent. I’m just feeling a little unwell this morning.”

“I will be sure she knows, my Lord,” Jimmy said, pulling the window closed again lest Will become too cold. “I’ll return shortly. And I am so sorry! I should have known not to bring you such strong-smelling food!”

“It’s never bothered me before,” Will said, offering him a small, bewildered smile. “There is no hurry, Jimmy. If the paper has come, please bring it as well?”

“Certainly, my Lord,” Jimmy said, and bustled off to get Will a less dangerous breakfast.

He made good use of his time in Jimmy’s absence, making a quick trip to the washroom to relieve himself, still somewhat shaky and slow. Jimmy returned with a smaller tray and a bright smile, eager to see to Will’s comfort. The toast was much easier on him, lightly buttered as it was and with a bountiful array of bland, fresh fruits and subtle preserves that suited him very nicely.

He donned his spectacles despite his lingering headache and read the accompanying paper while he nibbled the toast, his nostalgia for the city surprising him. He rather missed the noise and bustle of the Capital and looked forward to returning, but Hartford House was so peaceful that he was content to merely read about the excitement happening there rather than participate in it.

The front page held a sweeping report on the Council for the Betterment of Omegas that was so scorching in its exposure of the members that Will couldn’t help but smile at it. The list, lengthy and shocking, effectively unmasked the members to their families and social circles and he imagined that no few dinner plans were being rearranged to exclude those who had attended.

He scanned the names but was none the wiser, being somewhat uninitiated still in the Who’s Who of Society. That is, until he saw his father’s name near the end of the list.

It sent an ugly flush of pain through him to see it there, printed in stark black and white, no less or more assuming than any other name, but more meaningful to him.

Statton Charles Graham, Earl of Reddig, was a member of the Council.

Jimmy, quietly clearing away the small dishes from the brunch, ventured, “Bad news, my Lord?”

“No, Jimmy, just unexpected,” Will breathed, driving the thought of his father from his mind. “Do you recall that Council I spoke to you of? The one formed to oppress Omegas?”

“I could never forget something like that,” Jimmy said, settling the lid on the tray when he finished, but leaving the little teapot and cup out on the table. “Mr. Berger and I had some discussion on that count, abrupt and interrupted as it was.”

“The papers were provided with a ledger from their meetings listing all of their members and their true intent. It’s a scathing article, but listen,” Will said, a slight smile on his plump lips as he read on, “This ledger was very generously provided by the Marquess of Clarges, whose statement to this publication was adamantly in protest of this Council and every core belief listed in said ledger.”

“His Lordship did that!” Jimmy said, uttering a soft, surprised laugh. “That is wonderful! Heavens, he doesn’t waste any time, does he?”

“He certainly doesn’t,” Will said, reaching for his bond without thinking, an automatic grasp for the warmth he knew awaited him. It rose at his touch, driving back the lethargic weakness that weighed his limbs, like welcome sunshine on his skin. “And Hobbs is in custody in the Capital already. Magistrate Crawford confirmed his identity to the High Court. A ruling is expected this evening.”

“That is a huge relief!” Jimmy said, depositing the tray in the hallway.

“It truly is!” Will said, some portion of his constant anxiety lifting with the knowledge that at least one threat was thoroughly vanquished. “Before very much longer, Abigail will be allowed out of custody and be free to live her life. I really must get in touch with the Fosters on her behalf.”

“It looks as if his capture has provoked more interest in Miss Hobbs,” Jimmy said, pointing to the back of the paper.
Will promptly turned it, finding the Society Column filled with concern for Abigail, the lamentations of mothers bemoaning the injustice heaped upon her youthful head, the regrets of fathers who rebuked Hobbs for causing such turmoil in his daughter's life.

“Little girl lost,” he murmured, smiling to think of Henry passionately defending Abigail’s innocence on his behalf, moved by the truth of her plight. “How public opinion has changed, and for the better!”

Nowhere in the column was there any indication that Society had remarked the arrival of Alana Bloom to Chelsea House or found anything at all odd about the woman staying there in Will’s absence.

Whatever Hannibal had done, he'd certainly done a thorough job of it.

He turned back to the column about the Council, reading it again and smiling, wishing he had been there to support his husband and bear witness to his righteous temper.

Dr. Sutcliffe’s visit went swimmingly and Morgan was thriving, small as he was. Miss Shell assigned herself to the case personally and the Misses had round-the-clock assistance, both from the Capital Midwives Society as well as from the protection agency Hannibal had hired from.

He spent the late morning attending to some business and tidying up in preparation for his return home, pleased that he would make it back with time to spare before Grandfather’s guests were to arrive.

“Letter for you, my Lord.”

“Thank you, Black,” Hannibal said, plucking it from the offered tray. He frowned when he saw that it was from the Ministry of War and his fingers trembled slightly as he slit the envelope open.

Lord Clarges,

It is with heavy regret that I write to inform you that the space you requested on our freighters is no longer available. It simply is not feasible for the Ministry to allocate so much cargo space to your private shipments when we must use all available space in support of your soldiers on the front.

Please accept our deepest apologies and know that we will do everything in our power to accommodate you in your future requests.

Sincerely,

Timothy Sinclair, Earl of Rathmore, Ministry Seat 7

“That rotten little bastard,” Hannibal snarled, garnering nothing more than a raised eyebrow from Mr. Black. “Fetch my things, Black, I’m going out.”

“Will you be needing a coach or your horse, my Lord?”

“The horse, please,” Hannibal answered, annoyed at even the thought of taking the coach out in the afternoon traffic. “If anyone asks, I’m heading to the Ministry of War.”

“I will relay that to any interested party who should know it, my Lord,” Mr. Black said, and Hannibal knew that there were very few people Mr. Black considered important enough to warrant telling, which suited him just fine.

In under ten minutes, Hannibal was clear of Chelsea House and on his way, weaving through the foot traffic, carriages, and coaches that thronged the roads of the Capital. His outrage grew with every moment, because he knew without a shadow of a doubt what had prompted this sudden reversal of the Ministry.

Clark Ingram and his band of exposed cowards, naturally.

The Ministry of War rose opposite the courts, the ideals of destruction and justice so intertwined that even a road was not able to separate them fully. Hannibal tied his horse to a ring out front and flung a coin at a lingering little urchin, telling him, “If he’s here when I get back, there’s three more just like it.”

“Aye, m’Lord!”

The halls echoed with the rap of his footsteps, fast and firm on the marble. People moved about their work, only a rare glance trained his direction as he took the sweeping stairs to the second floor.

It took little effort to locate Rathmore’s office, and even less effort to startle his secretary into confirming that Rathmore was in.
“Tell him Lord Clarges is here to see him,” Hannibal barked, stripping his gloves off with a fury as he paced, impatient and agitated.

The secretary vanished, emerging a scant moment later to squeak, “Lord Rathmore will see you, my Lord.”

“Thank you,” Hannibal growled, stalking past them to encounter Rathmore lounging behind his desk, looking about as hard-working as a napping cat.

“Lord Clarges,” he said, sliding to his feet to extend his hand, which Hannibal did not take. His smile slipped sideways, more of a pained scowl, but he dropped his hand without remarking it. “I usually insist on appointments, but I will make an exception for family.”

“In appointments?” Hannibal asked, nose wrinkling in a slight snarl. “But not for freight?”

“Ah,” Timothy said, as if he hadn’t known the reason for Hannibal’s arrival until now. He crossed his arms behind his back, attempting to puff his chest out, but Hannibal towered over him in more ways than one no matter his posturing. “I understand that you wish to ship supplies to our troops, but alas I could only appropriate that much cargo space for an active duty officer. I had hoped the letter was self-explanatory.”

“The letter was self-explanatory,” Hannibal confirmed, tapping his hat against his thigh. “Your decision, however, smells of corruption, Lord Rathmore.”

“Corruption?” Timothy echoed, one brow hiking over his eye. “You say that to me in the same breath as asking me to grant you freight space due to our family connection?”

“I asked you to grant me space due to my veteran status,” Hannibal pointed out. “Space for medical supplies and other necessities for the hospitals on the Continent, as per the manifest I submitted through my solicitor!”

“Ah, yes, the medical supplies,” Timothy mused, smoothing his hair with his fingertips. “I believe there was some concern regarding the unidentified ‘necessities’ that took up better than half of your shipping weight. That and the fact that the crates were addressed to an individual rather than the Chief Medical Officer.”

“As the former Chief Medical Officer,” Hannibal bit out, “I am not required to provide proof of what I ship or explanations regarding to whom I ship, I did so as a courtesy.”

“Perhaps not, but the general fear after your little show last night,” Timothy said, his smile oozing menace, “is that you’re supplying illegally-deployed Omegas substances which will enable them to continue to defraud the Ministry.”

“Def—now, see here—”

“I am sorry, Lord Clarges, but the matter is out of my hands. If you are not in the war, you are not given priority, and that is the end of the matter as far as the Crown sees things,” Timothy said, making no secret of his enjoyment. “I would encourage you to seek alternative methods of shipment, but in times of conflict, we have control of all freighters, both commercial and private. How very unfortunate for you.”

“No, not for me,” Hannibal said, drawing up with stiff offense. “For the soldiers you would deny medical supplies, Lord Rathmore, but not for me.”

“As you know, the Ministry of War has vetoed additional funding for luxury items,” Timothy said, relishing every word, “and if you are not active duty then anything you wish to send would be counted as a luxury item, and we both know there is no room in war for luxury, don’t we, Lord Clarges?”

“I would know, but you certainly wouldn’t,” Hannibal said, incensed. Faces flashed through his mind—imploring eyes, dirty cheeks, pain-tightened mouths, gaping wounds and ragged cries. How many? How many were Omegas? How many had only just joined the war effort and now faced a lifetime in prison at best for their dedication to their country if they could not get their needed items?

And then he thought of Will, who would do anything in his power to help, whatever the cost. Who had flung himself at a crazed Alpha in order to protect the daughter Louise Hobbs had died shielding.

Will, his Omegan spouse who was the only one in the world who could understand what this meant to him. A desperate bid to help those whom he had unwittingly sentenced to pain and suffering in his ignorance. He had a chance now to make up for it, a chance to help, to clear up these issues from the inside and carve out a tiny crevice of almost-safety for those who were most vulnerable. A chance to put the teacup back together.

And if one could be mended so too could another.
Hannibal glowered at the pitiful excuse for a man before him, already revisiting his backup plan. He had been hopeful to get at least one shipment out before being discovered, buying time to make arrangements on the Continent, but that would not be the case, it would seem.

“You have made some very well-placed people very unhappy, Lord Clarges,” Timothy said, taking Hannibal’s silence as encouragement. He cocked his head in mock sympathy and added, “It truly is a pity.”

“They will not be well-placed for much longer if I can help it,” Hannibal said, tugging his gloves back on. “Nor will you.”

“Surely you wouldn’t hold a grudge against your own family?” Timothy inquired, not sounding a quarter as concerned as Hannibal thought he should.

“If I have no qualms exposing my father-in-law to Society as a member of that blasted Council,” Hannibal said, pinning Timothy with his fiery amber eyes, “then you stand very little chance of being shown mercy, Rathmore. My mate’s tenderness for his sister makes her tolerable. That tolerance does not extend to you.”

Timothy blinked, his mouth tightening and his lids falling to conceal the calculation in his eyes.

“My solicitor informs me there have been lines of inquiry into my business dealings,” Timothy said, seating himself behind his desk again and pulling a stack of papers before him. “I would be very careful, were I you, Lord Clarges. Of the two of us, only one is endowed with the power to send a man to war, hm?”

Hannibal’s nose wrinkled again, his Alpha fangs flashing in a brief, unhappy snarl of displeasure, the tip of his tongue touching the curve of his lower lip in fleeting contact before he purred, “Enjoy that power while it lasts, Rathmore. You’re not nearly as clever as you imagine you are and I, for one, am going to enjoy watching you squirm in a fire of your own making.”

“As I said, Lord Clarges, you could always regain your freight allocation by purchasing another commission and rejoining the war effort,” Timothy suggested, steepling his fingers beneath his jaw, his gaze as sharp as his smile. “But I, for one, would much rather squirm in a fire of my own making than stand in a hail of bullets. Wouldn’t you?”

Hannibal tipped his chin up, glaring down his nose at Timothy, and left the office in a boiling temper.

He had calmed considerably by the time he reached Mr. Buddish’s office, eager to settle his business and catch the earliest train back towards Hartford. He apparently was not calm enough, however, as the first thing Mr. Buddish said upon seeing him was, “Has something gone awry, my Lord?”

“Yes, my disposition suffers terribly when I am separated from my husband,” Hannibal snapped, accepting the tea the office maid brought him. “The Ministry of War has blocked my bid to ship supplies to our troops, ostensibly for lack of room, but there is very little doubt this is backlash from the Council.”

“I have already been exploring options on the Continent, at your husband’s instruction,” Mr. Buddish said, moving to his files and plucking several envelopes out. “There is a manufacturer there I have sent an inquiry to, but it will take some time to get a reply.”

“Time is what we do not have, but we will do our best,” Hannibal said, restless and unhappy. He plucked up Mr. Buddish’s bedraggled pencil and jotted down the address he had for Captain Rogers, saying, “This is my contact on the front. Write to him and try to arrange an exchange point. Perhaps he can reach the suppliers on our behalf and negotiate an arrangement.”

“I will do so, and continue my efforts as well, my Lord. Between us we will find a way to get those supplies in,” Mr. Buddish said, looking only a little hollow around the eyes for what was no doubt a late night. “Miss Hobbs’ emancipation has cleared the courts and her request for a legal name change has been submitted. The Fosters have been writing to her in our care. I am, of course, not allowed to deliver them, but the Lord Chancellor has been holding them on her behalf and will deliver them to her once the case is settled.”

“That is very good news,” Hannibal said, grateful to have at least some. “Did you gather the information I requested?”

“I did, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish confirmed, delving into another folder. “I have all the quarterly reports of your various estates, the entitlements and distributions, nothing out of the ordinary in the least.”

“Good,” Hannibal said, sipping his tea to gather his thoughts. “And what entitlements are available for my spouse?”
“Omegas are not considered male by the law, no matter their choice or upbringing, so they cannot inherit as an Alpha or beta male can,” Mr. Buddish said, sounding less than pleased by it. “He is, sadly, no more included in the matter of estate than any spouse you might take.”

“May I create entitlements for him?” Hannibal asked, wishing his forefathers had not been so damnably certain their spouses were set to fleece them. “Surely the strictures on the inheritance from my mother’s side are less severe?”

Mr. Buddish checked his documents and shook his head, saying, “Because he is not related by blood to you, there would be no possible way. I am sorry. As your spouse, should you precede him in death, he will live on the largess of your male heir. You are within your rights, however, to make amendments to His Grace’s will, which has generously provided for your spouse.”

“And what provisions are those?” Hannibal asked, knowing little outside of the fact that his grandfather had said Will was taken care of.

Again, there was a brush of papers and some searching before Mr. Buddish said, “His Grace amended a previous entitlement set by his own hand that Marsham Heath would be bequeathed to William Graham at the time of His Grace’s death, along with all profits made the year previous to his death, while any outstanding deficiencies would be settled from his own private coffers. He has also set a trust, my Lord, of some one-hundred thousand to be paid out in per annum sums for the care and upbringing of William Graham’s children by you, Lord Clarges, and for the comfort of your spouse. He is, in all, very nicely set on. I see no deficit that you may fix.”

Hannibal nodded, feeling vastly ashamed of himself that his grandfather had taken such measures under the assumption that Hannibal himself would toss Will out of Hartford House like a mongrel dog the moment Grandfather passed away.

He looked out of the window, past the sooty glass and crowded buildings, past everything into the depths of his own memory to find Will as he had last seen him, pale and shaken in the foyer, his own brave and determined little soldier holding the fort at Hartford.

“He will, naturally, be entitled to the Dower House in Hartford Town when your heir marries,” Mr. Buddish went on, professional in the face of Hannibal’s subtle distress. “And, of course, there was nothing forbidding you from transferring any portion of your personal income into an account for him, so following your previous instructions I included him on all counts I was able. These are the amendments I’ve added to your will, to include your portion of the inheritance from His Grace.”

Hannibal scanned the document, memorized almost word-for-for at this point, but read the additions with care, pleased with what he saw. He initialed and signed in the margins before annotating the bottom of the page.

“I should like copies,” he said, nodding when Mr. Buddish indicated a second folder at hand. “Thank you, Mr. Buddish.”

“Naturally, it is my pleasure to assist you, Lord Clarges,” Mr. Buddish said, solemn. “It is a relatively a simple matter to divert the interest from your sewn-in entitlements to your spouse’s trust. On the matter of Hartford House...”

He delved into his paperwork yet again and withdrew another document, reading it quickly to be certain he had the correct one.

“You requested papers drawn up to state that under any circumstances Hartford House is to belong to your husband without stipulation or restriction,” he said, referencing their conversation on that count. “Naturally, as Hartford is, in essence, His Grace’s until his death settles it on your husband, there was no legal standing for you to do so. However, this document states that in the event that you inherit Hartford House, which according to His Grace’s Addendum will be official upon the birth of your first child, you wish possession of Hartford to be given to your husband. Effectively, you abdicate any claim to Hartford House and it will be solely the property of your spouse, Will Graham, to be settled as he sees fit.”

He handed the paper to Hannibal and said, “I must ask, my Lord, if you are quite sure of what you have asked? This gives legally binding ownership of your ancestral home to your husband. There can be no addendum to such a finalized contract. While I would never dare question the depth of your attachment, I do know that His Grace will have his own concerns regarding your decision and will no doubt raise them before he sees fit to sign this paper.”

Hannibal’s brows knit together in a frown as he read it, but he only said, “I will convince him, have no doubts on that count. I will deliver this to him personally and see that both he and my husband sign it. I have put off admitting to the existence of that damned Addendum long enough. Hopefully this will undo any damage my admission may yet do.”
“I wish you the very best of luck with that, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, tidying the papers and getting Hannibal’s copies neatly bound for travel. “When that is returned to us, we will send a copy back to Mr. Stammets. Considering the loss of the previous document, I believe I shall deliver it personally.”

“That might be for the best, Mr. Buddish,” Hannibal said, breathing a little easier to know he was just that much closer to having everything settled and being able to return home to Will.

Will returned to his suite later that day feeling rather accomplished. The guests suites were cleaned, aired, and prepared for their guests, the larders were groaning with prepared foods and extra staff were accommodated in the servant’s quarters, Mr. Landry was hired as the new estate manager, and the new guards Hannibal had sent from the Capital were circling the house like vultures in his absence but were otherwise very nicely settled in.

He was surprisingly tired for doing so little and returned to his room hoping to rest before dinner in the tranquil, soothing quiet.

He did not expect to arrive in the midst of controlled chaos, and slowed his pace as he approached his suite, staring in bewilderment at the stacks of brand new travel trunks the House footmen were shifting into his suite.

Winston dashed into the thick of it, tail wagging and tongue lolling, excited to have a chance to embroil himself in action. Will hurried after him, staring in surprise at the open trunks littering the entryway to his suite, a flurry of unfamiliar Omegas and beta women swiftly whisking items of clothing out and into his dressing room.

He followed them within, eyes widening with shock to see the cavernous space rapidly filling with every imaginable item he could ever possibly dream of.

And directing everyone with the sure confidence of a General on the battlefield was the same Omega from the Fashion House, with Jimmy in close attendance.

“What on earth is going on here?” Will asked, stepping aside as more clothing was borne in and hung with military precision.

“Oh! My Lord! Please pardon the mess!” Jimmy said, all smiles as he gestured around them. “You’ve had a delivery from the Capital!”

Will shook his head, brow wrinkling in confusion, but all he could manage was, “Are you sure there hasn’t been a mistake?”

“I am afraid I indulged in a little subterfuge, my Lord,” Nichola admitted, their smile small but devilish. “We required a final fitting and you were so kind as to indulge me, I fear I took advantage of your good nature. But in my defense, I did say the items were made for you.”

Flustered, Will laughed softly and shook his head, saying, “It is my mistake I did not take you literally.”

An entire trunk of fine foundation garments, stockings, and garters was opened before him and Will stared, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the wardrobe Hannibal had ordered for him. He drifted through the dressing room, which no longer looked overlarge and empty, not with so many people hanging and arranging the garments that had arrived. Even as he watched, dozens of pairs of shoes were unpacked and shelved, glittering buckled shoes, soft slippers, sturdy day boots, riding boots, hat after fashionable hat to match the various riding habits that had appeared, among other traditionally female items, all sorted for Jimmy’s convenience under Nichola’s advice.
It was a fortune in clothing. It absolutely had to be. Just the quality of the cloth was a fortune on its own, never mind the
expertise of the craftsmanship involved in tailoring the pieces. Adding in the accessories Hannibal had gone entirely overboard
on, this was worth Will’s dowry, at least, with more on the way every moment.

Will reached out and ran his fingers down the pearlescent brocade of an Omegan-style jacket hanging close by, almost a
replica of the one he’d worn to the Masquerade, and he knew there was no coincidence involved in that. He found himself
smiling as he rubbed the material between his fingertips, lost for a moment in the echoes of a waltz and the memories of that
night.

“Oh, this is perfect!” Jimmy declared, drawing Will’s attention. He held before him a lace and silk undergarment in a deep,
rich blue so dark it was almost black, and Nichola held up the matching wrapper, a pair of bedroom slippers in their other
hand.

“Surely he didn’t order that?” Will asked, moving towards it on impulse, unable to resist feeling the softness of the silk.

“Oh, indeed, my Lord,” Nichola said, handing the wrapper off to Jimmy, who held it out to inspect it. They delved into the
trunk and rose with several more, all in various colors—emerald, pale amethyst, and deep ruby. “He ordered two of each with
standing orders for the new colors as they arrive. I find these so stunning with your skin tone, but the fine pastels will be just as
flattering when they arrive, my Lord.”

“When?” Will asked, the word little better than a squeak. He valiantly fought the heat he knew was filling his cheeks and
both Jimmy and Nichola, professionals that they were, very politely pretended not to notice.

“Oh, yes,” Nichola said, absolutely serious. They handed more of the garments off to Jimmy, who busily inspected them to
familiarize himself. “He left standing orders for the latest fashions from the Continent, which I will happily escort to fit you for
and do any adjustments you may need, though my measurements are rather more precise than Mr. Avery’s.”

“These are all the rage on the Continent, my Lord,” Jimmy insisted, inspecting the lower area with curiosity and making a
satisfied little, “ah-ha!” of discovery when he saw the construction.

Will cleared his throat and dropped his hand, clasping his wrist behind his back for good measure. It was honestly
overwhelming, too much to take in, but he smiled as he scanned the room, any thoughts of umbrage rapidly wilting beneath
the warm pleasure of the joy Hannibal took in him. He imagined his husband in the Fashion House, ordering items, perhaps
thinking of how Will would look wearing them. He was so picky, Will knew, that he must have rejected so many things on some
preference or another, or asked for a desired pattern to be made in a color which suited Will better. He’d spent hours agonizing
over a sea-foam waistcoat versus a royal blue one, after all—it was easy to think this would have taken him half a lifetime.

“Were you the one who assisted him personally, Nichola?” Will asked, his fingers brushing over a stack of sensible corsets,
which would no doubt still manage to test Hannibal’s discipline despite their benign appearance, much like Will’s knees.

“I did, my Lord, and very happily, too,” Nichola said, making a gesture at one of the assistants that sent a box of gloves to a
different shelf where another assistant unpacked them.

“I am trying to imagine him ordering these things,” Will murmured, his eyes landing on the delicate undergarments again,
folded neatly and awaiting final placement. “Especially those.”

“Oh, he took some coaxing on those, my Lord,” Nichola confided, lovingly smoothing the folded material where a wrinkle
had dared mar the surface. “He was insistent that you were already a menace to his rational thought and that he feared he
might expire should he see you in such a thing.”

Will’s cheeks bloomed with vivid color but his smile widened to a grin, his small Omegan fangs bared in pleasure.

“And then he ordered two of all of them,” Nichola said with satisfaction, thoroughly pleased. “Apparently, his Lordship
feels the reward is worth the risk in this case.”

“He must be very confident he will survive the coshing I’m going to give him,” Will whispered, his eyes tracing every item
all over again, too delighted to be annoyed with his husband making good on that promise of three wardrobes to please him. “I
must go fishing at once.”

“I believe the catch you currently have is quite a good one, my Lord,” Nichola said, smiling when Will chuckled.

“May I ask you a favor, Nichola?” Will said, somewhat shy but hopeful. “I have an event coming up, a dinner party. It’s the
first we’ve hosted since my marriage... might you recommend something tasteful I could wear? As I have said, I have no head
for fashion and you are always so beautifully turned out.”
“My Lord, you flatter me,” Nichola said, embarrassed but pleased, one hand pressed to their cheek in a brief moment of indulgence. “I will put together some options with Mr. Price for you to choose from, if you would like?”

“I would be very grateful, Nichola,” Will said with heartfelt relief. “You are very kind to do so.”

There was a small addition to the commotion and Will heard Mina’s voice raised in inquiry. She followed the same trail Will had, puzzled, her blue eyes widening with every step until they showed whites all around with her shock.

“Will?” she asked, her voice a bare, small chirp of sound. “What on earth is all this?”

“The desperate act of a man who very badly wishes to be rid of me,” Will told her, looking around once more with a wide, satisfied smile.

When Hannibal returned to Chelsea House, Mr. Berger reported that the deliveries from Gideon and Garnets had arrived. He eagerly opened the elaborate box containing the teacup and took a peek, not daring to lift it from its velveteen bed. The porcelain was laced with gold, the shards and pieces drawn together with precious metal by a painstaking artist. There were places where the pieces had been lost, shattered too finely to be replaced. They had been filled in solidly with gold, silent testament to the tragedy that had befallen it. The precious metal veined the fragile teacup’s surface in a painful reminder to him that some things would always remain lost to regret, the whisper of what might have been a barb in his very soul.

“My Lord?” Berger ventured, noting the tears that misted Hannibal’s eyes as he gazed at it. “Is it not to your liking?”

“It’s perfect, Berger,” Hannibal whispered, tracing the lines with care for their delicacy. “The other set I ordered, did it come as well?”

“Packed and ready, my Lord,” Berger confirmed, relieved that he wasn’t unhappy. “Along with the lure-making set and the other gifts you commissioned. Mrs. Garnet sent along a strongbox of jewelry, as well.”

“Wonderful,” Hannibal said, pleased. He closed the box up securely but stayed Berger when he reached for it, saying, “I will carry this with me, Berger, thank you.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Berger said, nodding. “We’re ready to go any time you are.”

“Go ahead and send the trunks on to the railway, Berger, I’ll be along shortly.”

With everything settled as much as he possibly could settle them, and with the Misses’ little family in good hands, Hannibal packed the paperwork from Mr. Buddish into his valise and went to say his goodbyes. It felt strangely final, but in a good way, as if closing the book firmly on the past six years of his life in order to open a fresh one for his future. Alana, Margot, and Marissa were content, Morgan was well cared for, and they all were looking forward to their family visit, as he looked forward to his own.

He admonished them to contact Mr. Buddish with any need they might have and to rely on the Chelsea House staff to take care of them, and then he gathered his things to make the evening train to Chesterton.

It was a relief for Will to return to his suite after supper. It had been a long, exhausting, but overall productive day and he found himself more tired than usual. There had been no word from Hannibal, which he hoped meant his husband himself was on his way rather than intentionally not informing him.

Jimmy was busy in the washroom drawing Will a bath, and so Will did not trouble him. He let himself into his well-stocked dressing room and undressed, exchanging his formal dinner clothes for his new bathing slippers and the warm, lined robe Hannibal had ordered for him. Much to his mingled annoyance and amusement, his initials were monogrammed into the collar, as if someone else might mistake it for theirs, and it coaxed a weary laugh from him just to think of his his husband asking for such a thing, no doubt preening with delight as he did so.

“I really will have to cosh him,” Will sighed, casting an awed, delighted glance over the contents of his dressing room again. Had Hannibal attempted such a high-handed action in the early days of his return, Will would have been outraged, knowing he’d done so for his own selfish reasons.
Now, however, gazing at the bounty around him, Will only felt vast affection and tenderness swelling inside of him, knowing that Hannibal had taken his own time to personally choose everything here, not from a desire to buy his complacency or impress Society, but simply because he loved Will and wanted to do something unexpected for him.

Will truly wanted to do something unexpected for Hannibal in return, and he silently returned to the washroom still considering how he might manage such a thing.

“Nearly ready, my Lord,” Jimmy said as he wandered in, leaving Winston stretched out on the carpet next to his bed.
Will watched Jimmy set out sheets and washcloths before adding some oil to the water. The scents of lavender and chamomile teased Will’s nose and he drew a deep breath, letting it soothe him. He’d finally gotten over the strange illness that Mina’s tea had caused him, and he was resolved he would drink no more of it, not if it left him feeling so sick.

“Jimmy, is the artist who painted Grandfather’s portrait last year still in Hartford?” he asked, slipping his feet out of the little shoes, his toes curling on the cold tile floor.

“As far as I know, my Lord,” Jimmy answered, moving to take Will’s robe as he shrugged it off. He hung it on the ornamental hook next to the massive tub and reached out to steady Will as if he might suddenly take a tumble.

“Could you arrange a meeting with him for me? Here at Hartford House?” Will requested, accepting Jimmy’s steadying hand as he slipped into the scented, hot water to his shoulders. “And ask him if he could bring whatever supplies he might need for a sketch.”

“Are you wanting to commission a portrait?” Jimmy asked, eyes lighting up with glee.
Will nodded, sighing as he relaxed into the water. “A miniature. Something that might fit into a pocket watch casing, or perhaps a locket.”

“I will ask him if he does miniatures, my Lord,” Jimmy said, sliding the soaps and washcloths into easy reach from the bathing table. He pulled the bathing stool to the head of the tub and positioned it, asking, “Would you like your hair washed?”

“I’ll see to it myself, Jimmy, you needn’t trouble yourself,” Will said, a little mystified as to why the staff were so concerned with his comfort. Not that they had ever been anything but, only that Will’s persistence in resisting it had made them more circumspect in their offerings. “Could you put some of that oil on a cloth for me? I rode the rounds with Mr. Landry and all I can smell is pig manure and spoiled milk; I feel as if I could choke.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Jimmy said, dipping a cloth in the hot water and pouring a judicious amount of oil onto it. He rubbed it in and handed it to Will, who draped it over his nose and mouth with a happy sigh, settling back with his eyes closed to rest in the steaming water.

The door to Hannibal’s suite cracked opened and Jimmy looked up in surprise, holding his tongue when Lord Clarges himself pressed a finger to his lips, his golden eyes bright with delight.

Jimmy silently moved back into Will’s suite, closing the door behind him without a sound as Hannibal eased into the washroom, a little bedraggled from traveling, but too eager to see his husband to wait.

Hannibal closed the door with a soft click and paused there, greedily taking in the sight of his mate submersed in his bath. Will looked small and delicate in the massive tub, his lithe white limbs mere smudges of color beneath the infused, cloudy water. With the cloth over his face and his eyes closed, he had no idea Hannibal was anywhere near, and that suited him just fine.

Enticed by the peaceful scene before him, Hannibal rolled back his sleeves, thanking every god he could recall that the train had run only a little behind. As much as he hated arriving too late to share dinner with Will, at least he had arrived in time to catch him in the bath.

He settled on the bathing stool and took up the cup, ladling hot water over Will’s hair to soak it.

“You really needn’t, Jimmy,” Will protested, a sleepy murmur from beneath the wet cloth accompanied by a small furrow of his brow.

Hannibal said nothing, he merely poured another cup of water over Will’s curls, pulling them long in the water, and slid his fingers into Will’s silky hair in a gentle massage.

The moment he did so, Will’s exquisite blue eyes fluttered open, confusion already apparent because he recognized the touch, recognized Hannibal even with his scent blocked by the strong lavender oil. He snatched the cloth from his face, Hannibal’s rich Alpha scent eradicating the delicate floral oils, heavy and welcome in Will’s lungs.
Hannibal’s hands slid beneath his skull, kneading the nape of his neck with one powerful palm, smoothing his curls with the other, and Will subsided in the water, heart pounding. He reached up with one dripping hand and touched Hannibal’s smooth, high cheek, needing to confirm for himself that it was Hannibal here with him and not some painful figment of his imagination.

“Say something,” Hannibal whispered, leaning into the touch with the same purring contentment of a cat. He turned his head to kiss Will’s fingertips, still massaging his neck and scalp with cautious care.

“What would you like me to say?” Will asked, his words a husky purr, his initial surprised fading to pleasure.

“Anything,” Hannibal told him, his smile crooked and endearing. “I’ve missed hearing the sound of your voice.”

Will swallowed, wetting his lips with the tip of his tongue, his blue eyes sweeping Hannibal’s beautiful face over and over. There was a thread of shaky relief in his soft voice when he whispered, “You came back to me.”

Hannibal’s sculpted features tightened in a moment of pain reflected in his words when he asked, “Did you doubt I would?”

Will shook his head, Hannibal’s hands sliding over his nape, and he smiled.

“No, I didn’t doubt it, Hannibal,” he whispered, dropping his hand from Hannibal’s cheek to the rim of the tub. He pulled himself upright, grateful for the way Hannibal’s hands slid down to his shoulders to help him sit up. He turned in the sloshing water, curling against the end of the tub, and cocked his head as he gazed up at his husband. “You said you would always return to me, Hannibal. Welcome home.”

“I was not home until I was with you,” Hannibal insisted, cupping Will’s throat where the mark he’d laid had healed to a stark, vivid scar. He traced it tenderly, his touch reverent. The force of the love he held for his mate almost overcame him, then, and his amber eyes sparkled as he murmured, “You are my home, Will. Always and forever.”

“Hannibal,” Will breathed, shifting to cup his face with both hands, only then noticing the travel dust and how unusually unkempt his husband was. A small curl of acutely Omegan pleasure unfurled within him to know how eager his husband was to return to him.

“I’ve spent my nights searching for the sound of your breathing next to me, reaching for the warmth of you to find only empty air,” Hannibal purred, his lids falling to cover his amber eyes, pain tightening the bow of his mouth. His hand slipped from Will’s throat to his shoulder, smoothing the water away with absent affection. “Every moment I’ve spent away from you, I’ve spent looking for you—straining to hear your voice in a crowd, searching for your remarkable curls, reaching to grasp your hand next to mine.”

His words settled on Will’s aching heart like a soothing balm, his relief to have his husband back dampening his anger and hurt about that Addendum. He was so pleased by Hannibal’s abrupt appearance before him that he had no desire to quarrel with him, not yet, not now when he was touching Will as if every precious treasure he could imagine lay just beneath his skin.

“I’ve been haunted by you, Will, painfully and blissfully so, the ghost of your presence a constant reminder of the home I longed for,” Hannibal said, his lids lifting to pin Will with the full strength of his sincerity. There was no mistaking the aching swell of emotion that flowed into Will through his bond—love, and love, and love, against all odds or caution, always rising up to vanquish anything that might seek to part them. “I couldn’t bear another moment without you. I had to lay eyes on you, to breathe your scent and touch your skin and be whole once more, as I only am with you. When I say that you are my home, Will, I truly mean it.”

Will’s smile softened, almost tremulous with his painfully sweet affection for the Alpha before him. He dropped his hand to Hannibal’s chest where his heart beat beneath the layers of his clothing, sure and swift. His eyes swept closed when Hannibal leaned against him, forehead to forehead, breathing each other’s breath and silently absorbing all the tiny details that meant they were together again—the mingling of their scents, the soft rush of their breath, the minute flicker of their eyelids and the slight shifting of their bodies. The familiarity of it lifted a weight from them both, an oppressive sense of being slightly out of step, as if the world had tilted just a fraction sideways and no one had noticed but the two of them.

But the world righted itself as their lips met in a gentle, careful kiss. It was the softest of touches, a light and reverent brush of mouths that quickly deepened.

Will shifted his touch to Hannibal’s jaw, marveling at the heat of his skin, at the very fact that he was here, at the undeniable and fierce delight that flooded him from his bond, separate from his own deep regard but no less.
He opened his mouth and slid his tongue between Hannibal’s fine lips, drawing a rumbling purr from his husband that made his toes curl. He uttered a soft, sighing chirp of sound against Hannibal’s mouth and was rewarded with a tender but fierce insistence that left them both panting softly when they finally parted.

“I have missed you so much, Will,” Hannibal breathed, eyes closed as they rested against one another, shivering when Will’s hands moved to unknot his neckerchief, slow and studied in his movements.

“I missed you, too,” Will said, the admission heady, as heady as the understanding that grew more certain with every moment, even if some frightened part of him held him mute when he longed to say the words aloud. “I worried that with everything happening, you might be delayed from Grandfather’s party.”

“I would never miss it,” Hannibal said, easing back to undo his waistcoat buttons, eyeing the steaming water of Will’s bath with renewed appreciation. “And not just because Grandfather really would disown me for it. This will be our first event as a married couple; I know what that means in the eyes of Society.”

“Which you don’t give two figs for, if I recall,” Will murmured, tossing the neckerchief aside and shifting up onto his knees to undo Hannibal’s shirt. “Or was it three?”

“Two, always only two,” Hannibal said, chuckling. “I would hurry, were I you. I’m covered in dust and ready to soak and might not wait for you to finish before I begin.”

“You’ve never had any trouble letting me finish to this point,” Will said, pleased when Hannibal cocked a brow at him, impressed. He sank back into the water to settle with a sigh, eyes closing. “I’m determined to have a soak, myself, Lord Clarges. You’ll have to work around me.”

Hannibal grinned, thoroughly delighted, and made short work of shedding the rest of his clothes, piling them haphazardly on the little dressing stool with his boots shoved down next to it. He eased into the steaming water and settled, a delighted groan escaping him as the heat penetrated his aching muscles. Will shifted to settle against him, a warm and solid weight curled up between Hannibal’s spread thighs, the firm heft of his bottom resting in the cup of Hannibal’s groin.

Seeing the beautiful stretch of Will’s shoulders and the top of his back there before him was a lure Hannibal simply couldn’t resist. He plucked up the floating washcloth, wrinkling his nose a little at the clinging scents of lavender and chamomile, and soaped it thoroughly before easing Will to lean forward, folding against his dangerous knees. Hannibal smoothed Will’s wet curls away from his nape and ran the soapy cloth down his spine and back up, following the curve of his shoulder.

“Hannibal,” Will said, eyes closing and skin rippling in goosebumps as his husband bathed him, silent and humble. “You really needn’t.”

“I wish to,” Hannibal murmured, the water sloshing as he dipped the cloth again, rinsing it before soaping it anew. He sat up behind him and slid it beneath Will’s jaw with light pressure, smoothing it down the length of his throat and over the slope of his shoulder, working in and around the tuck of Will’s delightful body just for the joy of touching him. Will closed his eyes, the warmth that filled him from Hannibal’s touch far greater than anything his heat could ever inspire. His body gave with every brush of the cloth against his skin, every inch of him lovingly soaped and rinsed in silent admiration.

Another silent admiration rose against his backside, a sign of appreciation without expectation, simply the proud offering of an Alpha entirely captivated by the Omega he touched. And Will was equally captivated, the reflexive stir of flesh subsiding to comforting closeness as he returned the favor, washing and rinsing the miles of travel from Hannibal’s yielding body in an act equally as intimate as any carnal pursuits.

There was so much to be said, but they did not speak, reluctant to disrupt the comfort of being together with ugly reality. But the water cooled, and time marched on, and Hannibal finally heaved a reluctant sigh, saying, “As much as I wish we could stay just like this, I’m afraid I have some things to tend to before I can rest my weary head.”

He squeezed Will to his chest for emphasis, inhaling the sweet, lush scent of Will’s skin beneath the strong scents of lavender and chamomile. There was a richness to his familiar, sweet-hot perfume, round and ripe enough to sink his teeth into. He found himself rubbing his heavy teeth over Will’s mark, hands cupping and smoothing the taut firmness of his belly without even meaning to do so.

Will smiled to himself, covering Hannibal’s hands with his own and murmuring, “Should we stay a little longer, then?”
Hannibal purred against his throat and eased back with a reluctant sigh, brought back to task by Will’s gentle reminder. He rose from the tub with a dancer’s grace and reached for the bathing sheets, spreading his arms wide.

Will smiled, allowing Hannibal to draw him from the tub, rosy and pink from their bath. His heart trembled anew when Hannibal began to dry him, as loving and exacting in this act as he was in all others.

Hannibal simply couldn’t help himself. It was a rare opportunity to lavish care and attention on his mate and he had been so miserable without him. Every petty irritation, every gut-wrenching worry, every anxiety and upset that plagued him vanished like shadows in the presence of his solemn, perfect husband. It was a gift to be able to touch him this way, to give him even a sliver of the tenderness he was due, and Hannibal would make the most of that gift for as long as Will would allow him to.

He chafed Will’s long limbs dry, following the sheet with soft, brushing kisses here and there—at his shoulders, at the soft nape of his neck, at the little dimples above his round, firm backside, over the pinkened skin of his knees, lingering just below the delicate indent of his navel. He slid Will’s long, slender feet into his bathing slippers and finally rose to wrap a dry sheet around him, drawing Will into the damp circle of his arms.

“Gods, how I have missed you, Will,” Hannibal sighed, murmuring the words against Will’s throat, against the mark he’d laid on Will’s graceful neck. “Mr. Black was ready to bar me from Chelsea House, I was so disagreeable.”

“You usually are disagreeable,” Will murmured with a small smile, rubbing his nose against Hannibal’s skin before tipping his head back. “I’m just more tolerant than most.”

Hannibal grinned, his sharp Alpha fangs bright and dangerous and impressive.

“Yes, you certainly are,” he agreed, giving Will a squeeze. “And I must beg you to be more tolerant in the coming days, Will, and withhold from coshing me if you can.”

“Is there some particular instance you fear I might have to cosh you for?” Will asked, innocently enough that it put Hannibal on his guard.

“Only my particular delight in your method of settling matters with violence,” Hannibal admitted. He gazed down at Will with Alpha satisfaction brimming in his amber eyes, his arms gentle but firm around Will’s body. “There is so much I have to tell you, Will.”

“There is so much I have to tell you,” Will said, working his hands from beneath the sheet to grasp Hannibal’s bare flanks, smoothing his skin with absent appreciation. “Some of which you truly aren’t going to like.”

Hannibal frowned, concern filling his handsome face, but he admitted with a touch of chagrin, “Nor will you, I’m afraid. Sometimes, truth is the cruelest and most difficult thing to manage with someone you love, isn’t that right?”

Will smiled, shifting in the confining bathing sheet to cup Hannibal’s face with both hands, feeling every fluttering emotion through his bond and knowing how fragile his husband was in his honesty. Truth gave them the power to wound one another, and honesty could be more deadly than any sword in the wrong hands, as they both well knew.

“I love you, Will,” Hannibal said, simple and direct, as raw and tender now as he had been the first time, “When everything is said and done, please remember how my love for you has changed me from the man I was, and that there is nothing in this world I would not do for you.”

“I could never be in doubt of that, Hannibal,” Will said. He pressed a lingering, soothing kiss to Hannibal’s mouth and leaned in to embrace him, sighing with contentment when Hannibal cradled him close. His eyes swept closed as unexpected tears welled behind his lids, awed by how completely and perfectly happy he felt to be once more at home in his husband’s loving arms.

Chapter 44

With the warmth of their bath behind them, Hannibal returned to his own suite bundled into a bathing sheet while Will went to fetch something he said he needed. He was still tingling from the blissful confirmation that had occurred in the tub, the gentle but insistent scenting and closeness that had eased them both. The part of himself that had been unsettled, unsteady,
and deeply unhappy during his departure was now calm and quiet, reassured through scent and touch that his husband was near at hand.

He heard the door to Will’s suite open and the scrabble of claws clicking on tile before Winston came barreling through the open door at a mad dash, tongue lolling.

Hannibal chuckled, hastily escaping into his dressing room to change into his underclothes and dressing gown before the excited dog could reach him.

“He’s missed you,” Will said when he emerged, standing in the doorway still in his warm bathrobe, looking damp and delectable and dangerously approachable.

“I can tell,” Hannibal said, grinning when Winston jumped up to plant both forepaws on his stomach, tail wagging. He cut a sly look at Will and said, “He certainly never leaves me in doubt.”

Will’s brows shot up, both of them disapproving, and he asked, “Have I left you in doubt, Hannibal?”

“Never,” Hannibal said, his sharp-toothed grin widening. He ruffled Winston’s ears and pushed him down, gesturing the dog away as he moved to his valise. “I apologize for the state I was in; I was eager to return to you. I must’ve looked frightful.”

“Not that I ever recall,” Will said, edging through the doorway. There was a faint trace of tension to him that reminded Hannibal that his husband had never come in here of his own volition. He did, however, find Will’s scent lingering at his bed and took ridiculous satisfaction in the thought that Will might have slept here in his absence.

“Here, come in, have a seat,” Hannibal said, extending the invitation purposefully, pleased when Will relaxed. He opened his valise and removed the packets from Mr. Buddish, asking, “Are you chilled?”

“No, my robe is quite warm, thank you,” Will said, moving to take a seat in the little receiving area before the fire hastily laid while they were in the bath. He watched Hannibal open the packets, his blue eyes bright and curious. “You’ve been to see Mr. Buddish?”

“Yes, so often that his wife was prepared to level charges of infidelity against me,” Hannibal murmured, sorting the pages rapidly and reshuffling them in an order he preferred.

“Has there been word about Abigail?” Will asked, amused that Hannibal was so preoccupied he had to press him for information.

“Ah! Pardon my distraction, Will. Yes, the emancipation was granted and her name change is being processed,” Hannibal said, taking the seat next to Will’s with the little spindle-legged table between them. “Hobbs was captured in Chesterton, I’m sure news reached you here by now. I expect the moment he drops on the scaffold, she will be free to take up a new life.”

“And are we prepared to assist her?” Will inquired, making a note to write to the Fosters immediately.

“The Lord Chancellor and Mr. Buddish are managing her transition,” Hannibal answered, reaching across the table to wipe a droplet of water from Will’s cheek and smooth his damp curl behind his adorable ear. “I asked to be contacted before the execution. I don’t feel as if Abigail should be alone when her father faces his just consequences.”

“No, she shouldn’t,” Will said, pained to think of Abigail in such a circumstance. “How awful even just to hear of it. It must seem so unreal, like a nightmare.”

“No for much longer,” Hannibal insisted. “The Fosters have been writing to her through Mr. Buddish directly and the Lord Chancellor has taken a personal interest in her welfare. Before any of us realize, she will be Abigail Foster and can put the entirety of her life before this point behind her, if she so wishes.”

Will frowned, thoughtful and serious as he always was when his mind was addressing an issue which concerned him. His somber blue eyes searched out Hannibal’s, liquid with sadness when he asked, “Do you think we will ever bring her here to Hartford?”

Hannibal echoed his frown, drawing a deep breath as he considered the question.

“It’s only that we will surely remind her of something she would sooner forget,” Will added, smoothing a fold of his robe over his knee, fingers tracing the embroidered border. “If she strives to forget her past, will we be forgotten as well?”

“There is a danger of that, yes,” Hannibal answered, having thought along similar lines. “She will need time to adjust to her new life, time to get to know the Fosters... but her mother was my wife, however briefly, and Abigail was born in this house, if such a violent act can be considered a birth. I have every hope and expectation that when she is comfortably settled enough
that her curiosity outweighs her reservations, she will seek to know more about her mother and wish for a deeper connection with us both."

"I hope so," Will said, patting his thigh to get Winston’s attention. He sank both hands into the dog’s soft, mint-scented fur, idly rubbing his ears. "I realize that things would have gone very differently for her had we not arrived, but I dislike that we will forever be haunted by the specter of Louise Hobbs and the horror of her dying right before Abigail’s eyes. I wish for a chance to create much more pleasant memories under much happier circumstances."

“We will,” Hannibal said, with unfailing Alpha confidence. "It will take some time, but those memories may yet be made. Have hope in that potential, Will."

“Hope is not something I excel at,” Will reminded him, gracing Hannibal with a wry, fond smile. "But you have the unusual ability to inspire it in me, just as you no doubt inspired it in every Omega in the country with your statement to the press.”

Hannibal caught Will’s sideways glance, a smile curving his lips.

“We get the paper the same day now, thanks to the railway,” Will informed him, enjoying his consternation. “I saw the article about the Council and I am reminded again that you are nothing if not incredibly impressive, Lord Clarges.”

Hannibal grinned, heavy Alpha fangs bared in a flashing gleam. “Solely due to the influence of my beautiful and dangerous mate, I assure you.”

Will cocked his head, affection shining in his eyes as he said, “Oh, I can’t claim all the credit, Hannibal; but I appreciate the sentiment... and I realize that you’re attempting to get me into a conciliatory mood.”

“Is it working?” Hannibal asked, hopeful.

“The ogling in the washroom didn’t hurt,” Will whispered, gesturing at the papers. “I trust this isn’t another separation agreement?”

“Gods no! Never that, quite the opposite, actually,” Hannibal said, fingers sliding over the papers to smooth them. His nerves were wound tight, entirely unlike him, but the thought of hurting Will again plagued him with pain and it was all he could do not to fidget.

Clearing his throat, he handed a stack of papers to Will, stating, “Some time ago I had Mr. Buddish go through my assets and amend my will to make provisions for your care. The annotations at the bottom include you in matters of inheritance and the disposition of the estates in my name. I’ll need you to sign them, of course, when we have Grandfather awake to witness.”

Will took the papers as he spoke, his brows drawing together in a soft, bewildered frown as he read the notations. The provisions added by Mr. Buddish were dated days before, with Hannibal’s own initials added and dated earlier that afternoon.

“The entitlements are such that I could not alter them, being unfortunately set in perpetuity,” Hannibal said, handing Will another stack, “but this grants you the interest and profits from the estates and places my material goods equally in your name. I was able to open an account for your use in the Capital, including you in all lines of credit extended in my name. The bills will be written out by Mr. Buddish from my own income.”

Will’s eyes grew wider with each line he read, confusion and shock evident on his beautiful face. He lifted his hand from Winston’s head to shift through the papers, reading them quickly but with discerning intent.

“These provisions here,” Hannibal said, handing him another sheaf of papers, his tone quiet and unassuming, uncertain how to interpret Will’s continued silence, “settle the bulk of my endowments on the eldest of our male children, with allotments set aside for any other children we may have. There is quite enough to go around unless we find ourselves with several dozen, which is by no means meant to dissuade you should you wish for so many. I trust with your business sense we will claim an even more substantial fortune by the time they have need of it.”

Will swallowed down the tightness in his throat, aware of the nervousness and tight apprehension trickling into him from his bond to Hannibal, though his husband was studiously attempting to control it. He read each line carefully, giving it the weighty consideration it was due, breathing slowly and shallowly to keep from bursting into relieved tears.

Because as much as that Addendum had wounded him, here in his hands was the proof that Hannibal wanted nothing more than a future with him, well provided for and securely settled in life as his husband, with their heir and children poised to be bestowed with the fruits of their labors.
Whatever he had meant with that Addendum, whatever that cruel someone had hoped for in revealing it, Will had been correct in declaring it meaningless. This was the truth. This was the man who loved him with such unreserved passion that Will all but drowned in the beauty of it.

“It must have taken weeks to get this information gathered,” he whispered, not trusting his voice enough to speak too loudly. His shining blue eyes flicked to his husband, the Addendum a painful pressure in the pocket of his dressing gown, a thorn yet waiting to prick them both when it was removed. “What prompted this sudden interest in amending your will?”

“It isn’t sudden,” Hannibal said, still uneasy but offering Will a crooked smile. “Shortly after the Masquerade I had Mr. Buddish begin an accounting of my assets; we were able to finalize everything this morning, thankfully. It’s natural, isn’t it, for a husband to wish to provide for his spouse?”

“I understand that you want me provided for, and you are far too generous on every count,” Will said, gently probing, “but was there another reason? Do you have some worry I should know of?”

Hannibal looked away from him, his profile so perfect it seemed carved from marble, the smooth face of deity who should be unconcerned with mortal fears, yet was plagued by them. Plagued by regrets of time lost and wounds delivered and lives slipping through his hands on the battlefield, by news from the front of those in need and a righteous sense of justice greatly offended.

“Soldiers heading south,” Will whispered, remembering how they had watched them march into the distance and the promise Hannibal had pointedly not made.

“Will,” Hannibal said, his name thick with emotion as he shook his head. “Please—”

“The war,” Will said, and Hannibal flinched, as if speaking it would somehow make it true. “Seeing them marching south worried you, didn’t it? You feared the war would somehow reclaim you and you wished for me to be legally settled before it did so in case you should not come back?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, striving for calm, doing his best to keep his emotions from translating to Will through his bond.

“They can’t call you back, Hannibal,” Will said, trailing off for a moment before asking with uncertainty, “can they?”

“I was the Chief Medical Officer, Will,” he said, opting for the brutal honesty his mate expected of him. “Had Grandfather not bought my commission and arranged for a skilled physician to take my place, there is every chance I would never have left the front. A doctor is of much more value to the government than a Duke’s heir.”

It settled like a cobweb over Will’s heart, faint and unnerving wisps of fear and dread floating in tendrils around him, invisible but unavoidable.

“Has something changed?” he asked, his heart picking up its pace just from the stillness that fell over his husband, just from the monumental effort he was putting into dampening the bond. “Hannibal, has something changed?”

“Lord Rathmore reminded me that he is endowed with the ability to send me back to the front,” Hannibal said, calm and rational and retreating into reserve. “I had gone to discuss the issue of my freight request being denied and we quarreled regarding it... and regarding our inquiries into his business dealings. He said I could have ample room for shipments were I active duty once more.”

“We will find another way,” Will insisted, his stomach dropping and a hollow terror winding up through his soul. “Hannibal, please promise me you won’t do anything rash!”

“I won’t do anything rash,” Hannibal promised, pained. “But we shall have to be more circumspect into our investigations regarding your sister’s husband if we do not wish for me to be suddenly ordered back to the front.”

“Surely, if Grandfather drafts an official statement naming you as his heir, Timothy will do no such thing? He is not a brave man. His own fear of the consequences will keep him from a decision that would certainly ruin him,” Will said, hardly able to force the words out past the tightness in his throat and unable to trust the impression he’d received from Timothy to tell the entire truth of him.

“One can only hope,” Hannibal breathed, composing himself. “Regardless, I wanted to ensure that you were looked after in comfort should anything happen to me. We are none of us promised a tomorrow.”

The depth of the love he felt for Hannibal struck Will like a hammer on glowing, molten metal, reshaping the vessel of his heart into something so much more beautiful than it had been before. He thought of losing Hannibal to the battlefront and
clenched his teeth against the bone-deep terror it inspired, his frightening imagination gracing him with a vision of the future that was bleakly empty, bereft of the man who meant so much to him.

“No, we certainly aren’t,” Will whispered, looking down at the papers in his hands and blinking away tears. “But you made certain any tomorrow I had without you would not suffer for lack of comfort. Hannibal, this is far too much—”

“It isn’t enough by far,” Hannibal said, clearing his throat in anticipation of explaining the next document he was ready to hand over. “But you are properly acknowledged as my husband and able to live independently as such, should you choose to do so.”

Will frowned, reminded of the decision he had yet to make official to his husband, the one which could part them, the choice he was always free to make when it suited him.

“And I fear that I have a confession which might sway you,” Hannibal murmured, his voice falling to a whispering purr more felt than heard, the words accompanied by a pang of anxiety Hannibal simply couldn’t prevent. It brought Will to sharp awareness of his husband, his mind cataloging Hannibal’s taut posture, the tight lines around his mouth, the set of his golden eyes as he held a document out across the small space between them.

For a moment Will was certain that Hannibal was handing him the Addendum, the original which had been filed with Mr. Buddish. He took it reluctantly, bracing himself to hear the explanation Hannibal might give, wondering if everything that had come before it was meant to console him for the loss they had orchestrated, compensation for what was set to occur should he bear Hannibal a child.

But it wasn’t that at all.

“I had asked Mr. Buddish to draw up paperwork naming you the sole and legal owner of Hartford House itself as well as the estate. As you know, the agreement Grandfather drew up provided you ownership only until you bear an Alpha son,” Hannibal said, worriedly observing Will for signs of upset or unease. “As Mr. Buddish pointed out, I have no legal say over Hartford in its current disposition, but he did create a contract on my behalf stating that I cede any claim to you.”

Will trembled, his wide, disbelieving eyes fastened on the paper without seeing it, his mind seizing on the fact that Hannibal had effectively nullified the Addendum, willfully, deliberately, insistently so. Without knowing Will was aware of it, he had taken steps to have it legally stripped of meaning, rendered inert in the eyes of the law to place Will once more irrefutably as the Master of the house.

“In the event that you do bear an Alpha son and control of the House reverts to me, this paper effectively surrenders my claim in your favor, reinstating you as the legal owner for the rest of your life,” Hannibal said, growing more anxious the longer Will was silent. There was a plea in his husky, deep voice when he insisted, “You needn’t worry about your place here in Hartford, Will. This paper ensures that it will never be taken from you under any circumstances, not by me, not ever.”

The words swam before Will’s eyes, wiggling about on the page to the point that he had to close them out and take a deep breath. They appeared on the back of his lids, line by line in perfect memory, putting Hartford House solely in his hands to be given on his death to a person of his choosing.

“Why would you do this?” he whispered, eyes still closed, the paper quivering in his trembling hand. “Hannibal... why would you ask Mr. Buddish to draw up such a thing?”

Hannibal had spent the entire trip home attempting to come up with reasons, with an explanation that would accurately convey his intentions. Yet the charm and eloquence he prided himself on, so effortless with others in his social circle, seemed to fail him at every turn with Will, leaving only awkward truth and painful consequences.

*Always* consequences.

“When I first returned to Hartford in the wake of the letter you sent me,” he said, watching Will’s eyes move restlessly behind his closed lids as if searching for something, “it was to find that Grandfather had created an Addendum to the previous agreement he’d drawn up, the one which placed Hartford in your possession.”

Will took a shaky breath, focusing on Hannibal’s words, on the anger and self-recrimination he could trace through the fibers of his bond.

“The Addendum stated that with the birth of any living child of ours, Hartford would revert to myself, and he would make arrangements for a separation should I so choose, leaving you only the length of his life to remain at Hartford,” Hannibal admitted, shame darkening his high cheeks. “After which, you would only be allowed to live here on my sufferance.”
Winston whined, uneasy with the tension he sensed in them both, his dark eyes flicking from Will to Hannibal. He poked his nose under Will’s lax hand, trying to cajole him, and Will began to pet him, drawing on the comfort he offered.

“I signed it without hesitation, of course,” Hannibal whispered, growing more unhappy with every moment, numb terror taking hold of him just to admit it at long last. “I began to attempt to woo you, such as I could manage in that state, but my intentions to strip Hartford from you changed very rapidly as I began to truly know you, Will. Please, you must believe me—”

“You signed it when you returned?” Will asked, his mind catching on that detail. The Addendum in his keeping was signed the day after his fall, the day they had left Hartford, not so long ago as the first day Hannibal had returned after six years of absence.

“Yes, the very day,” Hannibal said, pausing for a moment. When Will said nothing more, he added, “That morning on the lane when you cut me with your crop, the day we finally began to be honest with one another, I went down and asked Grandfather to have the Addendum destroyed.”

Will shook his head, his eyes fluttering open, his confusion tangible enough to taste.

“He told me it would be simple enough to have the original destroyed, but that the copy had not yet been returned. That copy has remained unaccounted for,” Hannibal said, holding his gaze, his amber eyes steady and imploring, “and I decided to have legal documentation created to refute it on the chance that it resurfaced. But I felt I must tell you of its existence, Will. I want to be honest with you in all things, even when the truth holds the possibility for terrible consequences.”

“Why did you never tell me until now, Hannibal?” Will asked, his eyes heavy with rebuke but showing no trace of rejection.

“Coward that I was, I hoped to hide it from you and spare us both the disappointment of knowing what I’m capable of. And then... then I fell so deeply in love with you that I put it from my mind entirely. I had many opportunities to tell you, Will, I know that. Believe me, I know it. I wanted everything else in place securing your position as well as your fortune before I spoke of it, so you could be certain of my intentions and not feel threatened by something which carries no weight any longer.”

His amber eyes sharpened, holding Will’s own.

“I held my tongue for fear of hurting you,” he said, strained, “for fear of driving you away from me, but I want no more secrets between us, Will. I do not want to wake one day to find you’ve left me because that damned Addendum has been found.”

“It has been found,” Will said, watching Hannibal’s eyes widen in surprise. “I found it, Hannibal. I have the copy.”

Hannibal shook his head, mouth opening to speak, but before he could say anything, Will told him, “It was left for me on my desk in my room just yesterday.”

“Left for you?” Hannibal echoed, panic filling his eyes to think that someone with such ill intentions had access to Will’s suite.

“We’ve had dozens of new faces entering the House for Grandfather’s gathering and with everything in such chaos, it would have been very simple for someone to slip in here undetected,” Will said, trying to believe his own logic and not fall victim to his own fears on that count. “Someone who very dearly wished me to be hurt by finding it.”

Hannibal flinched, dropping his gaze to Winston, looking anywhere but at Will’s calm, unmoved face. He recalled that expression all too well from the early days of his homecoming, the smooth exterior that shut him out in every regard.

And he feared that he was being shut out once again, only this time when the door closed it would lock for good and all.

“Will, I know how it must have hurt you—”

“Angered me, Hannibal,” Will said, reflecting on how disturbed he’d been in the hours following its discovery. “It angered me, not just because the two of you schemed behind my back with no regard for my well-being, but because it had been signed the very morning we left for Marsham Heath.”

It was Hannibal’s turn for confusion, absolute bewilderment pulling his mouth into a frown and tightening his eyes.

“I could not help but think that surely you had tried to manage the issue in your favor,” Will pressed. “That your sudden kindness and regard were merely the result of your desire to regain Hartford House, despite knowing full well it was anything but. Yet you insist that you signed it far before that moment?”
“Will, that Addendum was signed upon my return, I swear to you,” Hannibal told him, shaking his head. “Perhaps there was some confusion with the copy, but—may I see it?”

Will reached into his dressing gown pocket, sliding it forth and admitting, “It was my intention to question you regarding it, Hannibal. I’ve kept it locked in my jewelry box for safekeeping since things seem to have a habit of wandering off.”

Hannibal took it from him, confounded when he saw that it was indeed the missing copy, but with a vastly different date from the original.

“Will, I promise you, the date on this paper is false,” he said, dropping his hands into his lap, paper and all, lest they betray his nerves by trembling. “You may ask Grandfather and he will tell you the same, or Mr. Buddish, as I discussed this with him in detail when I had my assets accounted for.”

Will studied him, Hannibal’s earnest dismay offering another layer of relief to his certainty that he had the right of things, just as he’d told Mina.

“I would not lie to you,” Hannibal whispered. “I cannot lie to you.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” Will murmured, taking the paper from him again. “Perhaps it was simply a mistake, but with it being left for me as it was...”

“Someone intended for you to see it and assume that everything that had passed between us was my grand design to disenfranchise you,” Hannibal said, stricken, paling with mingled anger and hurt. “Nor would I blame you for believing so.”

Will folded the paper up carefully and laid it with the others that Hannibal had given him, splaying his hand on the stack in his lap.

“I didn’t believe so,” he admitted, giving Winston another rub on his head. “Even when I first saw it, I rejected it. I was hurt, and understandably so, that the two of you would ever seek to cause me such harm in such an underhanded way, but if you signed it the day of your return, that makes things a little more clear.”

“Does it?” Hannibal asked, the words a harsh rasp.

“There is a world of difference between the man who used to be my husband, and the man who is my husband,” Will said, a simple statement that drove trembling hope into Hannibal’s heart like a spike, threatening to bleed him dry with pain should it be removed. “Grandfather no doubt felt it was the only option he had for a Lecter heir and you saw a chance to reclaim your birthright from someone you felt had stolen it from you. From the cold standpoint of logic, those actions seem reasonable, though cruel.”

The vivid blush on Hannibal’s cheeks spoke volumes about his feelings on the subject, and only intensified when Will said, “Had you only asked, I would have given it back to you, Hannibal. Even had we never reconciled, my every intention was for Hartford to belong to a proper Lecter.”

“It does belong to a proper Lecter,” Hannibal said, rallying himself despite his shame. “It belongs to you, Will, and now it always will.”

Will drew a soft breath that was heavy with Hannibal’s Alpha scent, sharpened by his agitation and upset. He shook his head a little, tapping the papers with his fingertips before saying, “We need to take all of this to Grandfather and alter it, Hannibal. I understand that you wished to ensure that I would never be in doubt of your sentiments when you told me of the Addendum, but I would never wish to take control of Hartford House under such circumstances.”

“That isn’t why I did it, Will,” Hannibal said, braving his unwavering gaze once more. “I want you to have Hartford because I want this to be your home, our home together, and I never want you to feel as if you might at any moment be adrift in the world without an anchor.”

“I am never adrift in the world,” Will quietly told him, his smile small and gentle. “I have you, Hannibal. Our home is one another, and if everything else that has passed between us was not enough to send me packing, a misplaced piece of outdated documentation is hardly going to manage to do so, though some conspirator is going to be vastly disappointed in that decision, I’m sure.”

“Will...”

“My sister saw this, you know,” Will said, chuffing a soft laugh that was more unhappy than anything. “She was very persuasive in her arguments that you meant to deal me profound harm with such a thing... and I surprised myself by defending you.”
Hannibal held his breath, his amber eyes sparkling with hope that ached in Will’s chest, as palpable as the heartbeat that beat the rhythm of his name.

“I told her it was cruel,” Will said, fiddling with the corner of it, dog-eared from being shoved so hastily into his pocket, “but ultimately meaningless.”

“It is meaningless,” Hannibal said, husky and low. “It was meaningless the moment you slung a fish at my face and made me eat my own pride.”

“Literally,” Will whispered, a grin baring his modest Omegan fangs, petite but sharp and beautiful against the fullness of his mouth. He cocked his head, musing, “I could be cross with you about this, Hannibal.”

“But you are never cross,” Hannibal said, his own smile hesitant. “Only thoughtful.”

“And I have thought about this quite enough,” Will sighed, putting the papers aside. “The eventual ownership of Hartford House has caused a great deal of strife and cost us both more peace of mind than we should rightfully be willing to part with. When all is said and done, Hartford House is just a place; it is beautiful and beloved, but it will stand long after you and I have been all but forgotten in this world. Our grappling and grasping makes no difference in the grand scheme of things.”

“Whether we are remembered or not, whether it makes a difference or not, it is important to me that I take nothing from you, Will,” Hannibal said, chin tipping up just a fraction, a shadow of his Alpha pride rising to the fore. “I would have Grandfather’s original arrangement changed to keep it in your control. I damn the day I ever signed that Addendum and reject everything it stands for— I would offer you the world itself were it mine to give you, Will. Hartford House is little enough to salve the wound I’ve dealt you.”

Will eased Winston’s head from his knee and got to his feet, a slight smile curling his full lips. He slid between Hannibal’s loosely-spread legs and sank down to sit on one corded thigh, leaning in to wrap his arms around Hannibal’s shoulders. He drew him close, eyes closing as Hannibal buried his nose in his throat, in the juncture of neck and shoulder where the dressing gown curved over his soft flesh.

“I am very disappointed in you for signing that Addendum,” he whispered, holding him tight and smoothing his hair. “I’m even more disappointed in Grandfather for such a deceit. As clearly as I can understand what drove you both to it, I’m still very angry about it.”

Hannibal said nothing. He nuzzled closer to Will, clutching him hard, his breath coming in short, shallow pulses as he held his mate.

“I’ll be good and angry about it for a while, I suspect,” Will admitted, stroking his nape, goosebumps lifting on his skin as Hannibal’s heated breath spilled over his throat. “It’s somewhat of a luxury to me, still, to be allowed to feel angry.”

Hannibal pulled Will’s warm, welcoming scent deep into his lungs, filling himself with the only perfume he preferred—the sweet-hot, feverish scent of the Omega who held his heart in both perfect, cautious hands.

“I promise I will not complain when you cosh me,” he whispered, lifting his head to nuzzle Will’s delicate ear. “I will even take you fishing for a suitably heavy trout.”

Will chuckled softly, slumping against him with his arms wrapped tight around his husband.

“Even though I’m angry, I’m relieved to hear the truth. Never hesitate to tell me the truth, Hannibal,” he whispered, shivering when Hannibal grazed a kiss over the shell of his ear, a tickling brush of soft lips on his sensitive skin. “So, is there anything else you need to tell me?”

“No,” Hannibal said, the word a rumbling purr in his ear.

Finding himself rapidly distracted from his purpose by even so innocent a touch, Will eased back and held Hannibal’s golden gaze.

“Nothing?” he asked, cupping his jaw, his fingers pale against Hannibal’s tawny skin. “I’m finding your generosity has inspired me, Hannibal—now is the time to admit anything more you might be keeping from me.”

“Only my burning desire to be close to you, having missed you so much these past few days.” Hannibal blinked, cat-like and slow, the corners of his lips curled up in faint humor, even as the bond began to settle into a brilliant, beautiful glow. “Can you forgive me, Will?”

Will’s mouth pursed, but his fingers were gentle when he smoothed Hannibal’s high cheek, tracing the scar his crop had left, weighing the request in his formidable mind.
Hannibal’s hands swept up his spine and down again in a soothing caress and he turned his head to press a kiss to Will’s wrist.

“Please forgive me, Will,” he whispered. The quiet, heartfelt plea snared the red ribbon of their entwined lives and followed it, reaching back to the very first time their eyes had met in front of Hartford House to the moment they now found themselves in. It echoed like a whisper in a well, gaining force and momentum as it traveled back, touching every hurt and every circumstance that had parted them. “I cannot claim to deserve it, I can only beg you to consider it.”

Will loosed a small sigh, still caressing Hannibal’s cheek, warm and weighty in his lap and smiling ever so slightly. He pressed his forehead to Hannibal’s, nuzzling nose to nose.

“I pray that someday,” Hannibal said, a soft exhale over Will’s lips, “my love will fill in the cracks of all the pain I’ve caused you and you will find it in your heart to forgive me, even just a little.”

“I doubt I would have bothered defending you to my sister if I hadn’t already forgiven you,” Will murmured, his voice barely audible over the rush of blood in Hannibal’s ears. A smile teased his full lips to part over his pearly teeth, wry and gentle, “Just a little...”

The bond surged with joy, unrestrained and unquestionable proof of Hannibal’s sincere love for him.

“It would be churlish of me to refuse you,” Will told him, eyes closing with soft laughter as his husband graced the tip of his snub nose with another soft kiss, fleeting and sweet. “Especially when I said I would be generous.”

“You are generous,” Hannibal said, squeezing Will close to him in another tight embrace, burying his nose in Will’s damp, fragrant curls, nearly overcome by how dearly he loved his husband. “I have promised to make you happy, Will, and I will keep my promise.”

He nuzzled Will’s nose again, moving to kiss him but stopping short to whisper, “May I?”

“No,” Will said, shaking his head, but before Hannibal’s smile could falter, he purred, “it’s my turn,” as he caught his husband’s mouth in a hungry kiss.

He tasted of sweetness and of welcome and of more forgiveness, perhaps, than he pretended to. He tasted of warmth and ferocity and unquenchable spirit, the indefinable essence that was Hannibal’s home.

He could live a lifetime in a single one of Will’s tender kisses, spend an eternity in his husband’s firm hands, open and yielding and eager to give him anything he wanted. Will’s hand drifted to his chest, settling over his thundering heart as if lured there, smooth and hot and supple against him.

The kiss deepened with Will’s teasing nip, sharp enough to sting, the pain sucked away and swept free with the wet tip of his heated tongue. Hannibal purred, tipping his head to lavish Will’s lips with kisses, dipping his tongue into the well of Will’s mouth to find and tease his own.

It was a keen, precious agony of anticipation to be kissed by Will, to have the firm weight of his glorious body slowly growing warmer in his arms. It was an agony Hannibal would gladly suffer, punishment for sins he was eager to atone for, hungry for the lash of Will’s tongue and the dangerous nip of his sharp teeth.

“I love you,” he whispered over and over, moaning it into his mouth, breathing it against his lips, a mindless declaration of devotion pulled from him with each brush of Will’s mouth over his. “I love you.”

It danced at the tip of Will’s tongue, the compulsion to speak those words back to him almost too difficult to resist. He said them instead with his heart, with the tenderness of his touch as he stroked Hannibal’s jaw and throat, with the gentle affection in his seeking kisses and the soft sounds of approval that followed every urgent purr his husband uttered.

They were slow to pull apart, drawn back by nuzzles and sighs to get lost in one another again until they finally fell still, wrapped in each other’s arms and oblivious to all else.

“Are you still feeling generous?” Will whispered, easing back and shivering when Hannibal scented his throat again, murmuring against the cords of Will’s neck.

“Entirely so,” Hannibal confirmed, his smile easy and relaxed.

“Then do a favor for me,” Will suggested, casting a glance at the pile of papers on the table next to them. “Lock those up until morning and have me accompany you when you speak to Grandfather. I want to give my own assurances that his legacy is in good hands.”
“As you are my husband,” Hannibal said, giving Will another appreciative squeeze. “I will do as you say. My strongbox should serve well enough for now.”

He reached for the stack of papers but Will stayed him, an odd, cagey gleam in his dancing blue eyes.

“There is room in my jewelry box for all of it,” he said, sliding the papers into a neat stack. “You can lock it up for me and I can bring it down come morning.”

“That seems an odd place to keep documentation,” Hannibal said, reaching for it again. “I will have to get you a proper safe to keep your important papers in. Wouldn’t you rather I lock it in my own?”

“No,” Will said, working hard to suppress his smile. “I insist it goes into my jewelry box. It’s just inside my dressing room. Would you put it away for me?”

As far as requests went, it was an odd one, but certainly nothing Hannibal would refuse his husband. He merely gathered Will’s hand to his lips and kissed it, telling him, “Of course I will.”

It earned him a kiss, short and light on the bow of his lips before Will slid out of his lap with feline grace. He had hoped to coax Will into staying here with him, hoped to have a chance to hold him through the night, but he had no wish to push his luck and decided to let Will make the choice without his interference.

“Come, Winston,” Will said, patting his thigh to bring the eager dog to his side as Hannibal rose, the documents in hand. Hannibal graciously gestured Will before him and he headed back towards his suite, a gleeful grin of anticipation on his lips.

“Didn’t you say you had something to tell me, Will?” Hannibal asked, focusing with difficulty, drawn over and again by the rich note to Will’s scent that seemed stronger, perhaps maturing as the lingering effects of his suppressants faded.

He tipped his head up to look at Will as they emerged into his suite, his drowsy delight fading only a little as his mate moved away from him towards his nightstand. Winston trotted to his basket bed and flopped down, his brown eyes flicking between his two people, alert in case either one of them decided to vanish once more.

“I do,” Will said, drawing a bracing breath. He fished the small silver key to his jewelry box out of his nightstand drawer and came towards him, holding it out in offering. “But I think you should put those away first.”

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed, wetting his lower lip with the tip of his tongue and tasting Will there, faint but flavorful. He was heartened when Will smiled at him and began to turn down his bed, giving him no indication he would be sent away. “I suppose I should.”

It was very difficult for him to tear himself away from the sight of his mate in his bathing robe and slippers briskly folding his covers down. Simplistic as it was, his heart swelled with joy just to see Will so at ease and unguarded, going about his usual nightly routine with effortless grace.

He pocketed the key, however, and picked up a lamp to light his way, tucking the papers beneath his arms to open the dressing room door.

He placed the lamp in its bracket and turned the flame up, only to be confronted by the renovated space filled nearly to bursting with the clothing and items he’d ordered Will, and he suddenly realized why his husband had been so keen to maneuver him in here.

He was due a coshing, and he well knew it.

“Will—”

He turned in the doorway, his explanation cut off by the pillow flung in his face. It dropped to the floor to the tune of his sputtering, only to be immediately followed by a balled-up lap blanket, which snagged on his head and momentarily blinded him.

He tugged the blanket away with an indignant huff, finding himself face to face with his husband’s amused, wry smile and laughing blue eyes.

“At least it wasn’t a marquetry table,” Will said, thoroughly entertained by the expression on Hannibal’s face. “And believe me, when I first saw all that being carried in, it certainly did occur to me that you were owed a coshing.”

“I rather hoped I would be,” Hannibal admitted, noting how Will’s hands fell to the tie on his robe, slowly undoing the knot. “I do enjoy your capacity for violence.”

“Don’t you just?” Will murmured, the undone sash falling to his sides and the robe gaping open. “But I’m feeling generous, so I thought perhaps I might torment you with my knees instead?”
The robe slipped off, draping down the curve of his ivory shoulder before sliding down the length of his arm, clinging to his skin in such a way that Hannibal envied it.

And he didn’t even feel ridiculous doing so.

“You should put those papers away,” Will reminded him, a deft twist sliding the robe from his other shoulder to swing the heavy, lined material before him, swaying down the middle of his body in a waft of his sweet Omegan perfume.

“I should.” Hannibal was vaguely aware of speaking, but couldn’t for the life of him recall what he was agreeing to until the robe was pitched at his head, the soft folds draping around his face in heavenly scent he wanted to bury himself in.

By the time he pulled it free, Will was slipping into his bed, naked and supple and breathlessly beautiful. He patted the empty space next to him and said, “Hurry back, Hannibal, or else I may fall asleep before we find out if I truly can strangle a man with my thighs.”

Hannibal Lecter, Marquess of Clarges, war hero and veteran doctor, had never moved faster in the entirety of his life than he did in that moment.

And he never had he been so delightfully rewarded for his haste.

In the thick silence that fell over Hartford House in the dead of night, Will floated in a blissful, peaceful place of almost sleep, half smothered by Hannibal’s large Alpha body next to him and loving every moment of it. He trailed his hands through the crisp hair on Hannibal’s chest and asked, “Are you sleeping?”

“Nearly,” Hannibal murmured with a stretch, his toes reaching for the foot of the bed as he sighed in contentment. “No doubt I’ll sleep better tonight at your side.”

“I hope so,” Will said, rubbing Hannibal’s shoulder when he rolled against him, pressing Will into the bedding.

Hannibal uttered a soft, rumbling purr that trailed off, fading to a sleepy grumble as he became aware of Will’s slight tension.

“Is something troubling you, Will?” he asked, fighting the temptation of sleep to caress his little mate’s slender side, finding the places where his scars trailed around to his flanks, smooth but pronounced.

“I’m nervous about Grandfather’s gathering,” Will said, frowning into the darkness. He stroked his husband’s throat, taking comfort in his strength. “I’m not certain I’m ready to see my father again. I don’t know that I would ever be ready to see him again, especially knowing that he is part of that awful Council.”

“I wish he had been present at that meeting,” Hannibal said, a snarl unleashed with his words. “Though perhaps it is lucky he wasn’t. I might’ve truly lost my temper.”

“I’m glad that didn’t happen,” Will said, letting Hannibal’s scent and touch relax him, the sense of safety he felt in his husband’s arms able to overcome any worry, no matter how distressing. “He isn’t worth the effort and he is certainly not a worthy adversary. He’s just a bitter, cruel old man who never fathered a son and blamed the rest of us for his own failings.”

Hannibal stirred atop him, shifting to his side to drape over him, compelled to enclose Will in a solid wall of flesh to chase away his fears.

“He’s an old man who still haunts you, Will,” he said, his voice a quiet throb in the still darkness. “You no longer face him alone from a position of disadvantage. You will face him as his better and with me at your side.”

“Ready to defend me?” Will questioned, a soft laugh escaping him when Hannibal said, “Yes, not that you need it. I will, however, be ever at the ready to intercept anything irreplaceable you might feel compelled to fling at his head. I must remind Hawkes to place very heavy, very dangerous, very common objects all about the house for your use, just in case you need them.”

“That is very thoughtful of you,” Will laughed, amused, “but I refuse to allow him to agitate me.”

“Such a pity,” Hannibal whispered, kissing his stubborn little chin, “as I am always delighted to witness your righteous violence.”

“You enjoy it rather more when you’re participating,” Will reminded him, and Hannibal chuckled, unable to deny it. “And having subdued you with violence, I have a confession of my own to make, Hannibal.”

“Is this the troubling something you said I wouldn’t like?” he asked, feeling a pang of concern.
“It is,” Will confirmed, the trail of his callused hands raising goosebumps on Hannibal’s skin as Will stroked his shoulder and arm.

“As I have been thoroughly threatened by your knees and delightfully strangled by your marvelous thighs,” Hannibal whispered, brushing a kiss over Will’s temple, “I can hardly find the strength to be unhappy.”

“Good,” Will said, a raspy chuckle rumbling up from his chest. “You said that Hobbs was caught in Chesterton?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, tranquil and drowsy in the aftermath. “He was shot by a constable there, thankfully. I had the strangest fear that he was trying to reach you.”

“He was,” Will said without flourish, turning to tug against his chest, stroking his chest and shoulder to soothe him. “He came here to Hartford, Hannibal.”

Hannibal went absolutely still in his embrace, blank with shock as he tried desperately to make those words seem anything other than what they were.

After a long, pregnant silence, Will tentatively asked, “Hannibal?”

He tried twice to speak, and when he finally was able, he whispered, “I am sorry, Will, what did you say?”

“I said that he came here,” Will gently repeated, pressing soft, coaxing kisses to his jaw. “Yesterday morning.”

Hannibal shook his head, a tiny tendril of bleak, encompassing horror teasing through the bond despite the tight clamp he’d tried to put on it.

“Hannibal?”

“I am trying to curb my fruitless panic, Will, by reminding myself that your guards were here with you—”

“I sent them away,” Will said, mouth pressing tight with sympathy when Hannibal slumped, the terror in his bond making Will nearly dizzy with the force of his fear. “Francis had vanished and I insisted they go to find him. I realize in retrospect that it was not well done of me—”

“No, it certainly was not,” Hannibal said, the words a pained whisper. “Did you have the pistol?”

“I did,” Will assured him, reaching up to cup his cheek, hitching his shapely leg over Hannibal’s lean hip. “He came upon me on the lane up from my office. He said he hoped to take me hostage and exchange me for Abigail, but he was really hoping to provoke you into killing him.”

“Had I been here,” Hannibal said, a shudder wracking him, pure Alpha frustration with nowhere to spend it out, bitter anger and rage mingling with his fear to wound him all the more, “I certainly would have.”

“Hannibal,” Will said, arching up and tipping his head back, baring his neck not in a submissive gesture but in an offering of comfort. His eyes swept closed when Hannibal buried his nose against his throat, a shudder wracking his long frame. Terror for him, fear for a moment already spent and occurring without his knowledge or awareness, absolute dreadful certainty that there would be more of such, a deadly drama played out without himself there to affect the outcome.

“I’m fine,” Will purred, wrapping his arm tight over Hannibal’s shoulder to smooth his spine and nape, stroking him in soothing sweeps to chase the tremble from his body. “He never got close enough to do anything more than posture, I swear it. Winston was with me, I had the pistol, and I shot him.”

“Gods, Will,” Hannibal said, a tear-broken moan against his skin, the hot seep of tears burning against his throat. “You might’ve been killed!”

“But I wasn’t,” Will quietly reminded him, knowing that Hannibal’s outrage and anger stemmed from his deep love and his rightful worry. “It was all over in a heartbeat, Hannibal. I shot him. I nearly killed him.”

“Why did you not tell me?” Hannibal demanded, lifting his head, searching for Will’s gaze in the darkness but finding only frustrating shadows. “Will, why did you not write to me? I would have come immediately—”

“I found the Addendum when I sat down to do just that,” Will said, reaching up to find Hannibal’s tears with his fingertips and smooth them away. “By the time I had recovered myself sufficiently to write you, Jimmy and Zeller were already long gone.”

Hannibal shook his head, confused, prompting Will to say, “Zeller is the one who came and collected Hobbs with Peter’s help. He asked for Jimmy’s assistance in taking Hobbs to Chesterton where no one need know what happened. He feared that if Grandfather found out, it would frighten him and do him too much harm in his fragile state.”

“So the general consensus was to lie about it?” Hannibal asked, the words bitter and sharp.
“Hannibal, you know I wouldn’t lie to you,” Will said, a touch of reproach in his voice that made Hannibal drop his head, seeking the solace of his throat once more. “I couldn’t even wait until morning to tell you. I didn’t want to pass a night in your arms thinking I had deceived you even by omission.”

Hannibal clutched him close, forcing a breathless squeak from his mate when he pinned him again, needing to cover Will’s body with his own in an instinctive bid to protect him from a threat that had already passed.

“You protected me, Hannibal,” Will murmured, grazing kisses over his forehead and down his cheeks, shifting his impressive thighs around Hannibal’s hips to tuck him close. “Even from so far away, you protected me. The pistol you left for me brought Hobbs to justice with a single shot.”

“Need I even mention how glad I am that you bothered to carry it?” Hannibal asked, lifting his head again to glare down in Will’s general direction, his indignation tangible enough to his mate’s perceptive senses, “considering that despite your enviably sharp intelligence, you are consistently reckless and prone to dashing straight into the mouth of danger despite anything I even attempt in order to protect you?! I leave you in our home with guards and a weapon and you—” he cut off when Will hitched his leg up higher, sliding his knee up Hannibal’s side and down again. Aghast, he sputtered, “I refuse to be diverted by your knees, Will Lecter-Graham! You will cease that this instant!”

“Not when it’s working,” Will chuckled, clamping his sturdy legs around his husband to drag him up tight, his arms twining around Hannibal’s neck to draw him down flush against him. “And you tried to divert me with your chest hair in the bath, so I’d say a little turnabout is fair play, wouldn’t you?”

Hannibal flushed, fairly caught out.

“There’s no sense getting beside yourself over something that’s already over and done with, is there?” Will said, feeling Hannibal relax ever so slightly in his arms.

“I will decide what I get beside myself over, thank you very much!” Hannibal informed him. “I am very cross just now!”

“I can tell,” Will murmured, stifling Hannibal’s frustrated huff with a coaxing kiss, his heels sliding down the backs of Hannibal’s thighs to wedge between them, pulling them open. “I’m sorry, Hannibal. I should have kept the guards. I should have known that Hobbs would come here—my Gift is such that I felt foolish for not having anticipated he would. I wouldn’t say I ran headlong into danger this time, but I will own that I should have managed myself differently. I apologize for frightening you, Hannibal.”

“Damnation,” Hannibal breathed, frustrated. As much as it upset him, Will was right in one thing—it was over and done with, and no amount of anger about it would change one whit of it, not anymore. “How am I to remain angry when you do that?”

“Do what?” Will asked, sliding his toes over the backs of Hannibal’s calves and up beneath his thighs, moving to press his ankles tight at Hannibal’s haunches. “Apologize? Or blatantly attempt to distract you with my knees? Perhaps I should fetch a pair of stockings and wheedle you until you forgive me?”

“As you have done nothing wrong, Will, my forgiveness was never in question! Only your determination to murder me with anxiety!” Hannibal said, rapidly weakening in the face of his husband’s charms and good sense. In a last-ditch effort to get his point across, he promised, “We are going to have a discussion about your propensity to disregard my efforts to protect you! And you will bloody well cover your knees when we do!”

“Yes, that sounds very engaging, Hannibal,” Will agreed, sliding his hands down Hannibal’s taut back to grasp his backside, filling his hands with warm flesh and giving it a squeeze. “But I think I shall probably always be just as I am. I suppose the only way you’ll be able to make sure I’m safe is to stay by my side. Don’t you think?”

“Will, do you mea—”

His question got lost in a kiss, and his intentions were, indeed, diverted by his husband, who was ever so much more dangerous than his knees let on. But in all honesty, they both knew he was more than willing to be distracted from his upset by Will’s unrepentant determination to seduce him, and Hannibal resolved to allow the matter to rest.

He was home now, after all. He was back where he belonged in his husband’s warm arms, back in his place with Will, and no one—not Hobbs, nor Mason, nor this mysterious shadow who plagued them—would ever bring harm to his mate so long as he drew breath beside him.
“I do love you to absolute folly, Will, and there is no doubt in my mind that you will be the death of me,” he admitted, and sank down into his husband’s eager embrace to the sound of Will’s soft, delighted laughter.

Chapter 45

Will descended to see Grandfather the next morning ahead of his husband with the packets in hand. Hannibal had been reluctant to agree, but in the end had put up no argument. The issue of the Addendum was settled for the two of them, but it cut much deeper coming from the man Will had spent the last six years alone with.

This was a conversation best had in private, and one Will was determined they would have. He knocked and was granted immediate entry with the low warning from Zeller, “No sneaking him food.”

“I would never,” Will promised, and when Zeller strained a look past him, Will said, “His Lordship will be along momentarily. I’m here to see His Grace about some paperwork. Is he receiving?”

“You? Always,” Zeller said, falling back to admit him with a gesture that managed to be half respectful, half mocking, much like the man himself. “You want breakfast here with him?”

“Thank you, Mr. Zeller, that would be lovely,” Will said, amused. “I’ll need some time alone with him, if you please.”

“I’ll be right outside the door,” Zeller said, following him through to give Will access to Grandfather’s bedroom proper and closing the door securely in Will’s wake.

“Well, good morning, my dear,” Grandfather said, propped up in his bed by a mountain of pillows, looking fragile but much improved with Zeller’s ministrations. “This is an unexpected pleasure.”

“Your Grace,” Will said, and an immediate cloud of concern fell over the Duke’s lined features. Will came to a stop at his bedside, solemn and still, his fondness and love for this aging Alpha softening his hurt. “You look very well this morning.”

“And you look very pensive, my dear,” Grandfather said, wary but concerned. He was too cagey an old fox not to feel the huntsman’s gaze, but too proud to flee before it.

“I am pensive,” Will admitted, the ache in his heart becoming more pronounced. He composed himself, aware of Grandfather’s eyes on him, and managed to say, “I have had a terrible shock.”

“Tell me what is distressing you and I will sort it immediately,” Roland said, eager to put a smile back on his grandson’s beautiful face.

Will lifted the Addendum from the packet of paperwork and handed it to his grandfather. With studied calm, he said, “I have something which belongs to you. Something which came into my keeping through a very devious design.”

Roland took it with trepidation, his eyes scanning the sentences with growing realization.

“Will, please do not misunderstand this,” he said.

“There is very little to misunderstand in a document so tellingly thorough,” Will said, moving to take a seat at Grandfather’s bedside, the rest of the documents in his lap and his hands folded atop them. “I understand that you were desperate to get your heir and the only way Hannibal would agree was to be free of me entirely. You did as you must to secure your family’s interests and as I had no one to see to mine, I had no way to protect myself from your decision. I relied on you to honor your promise and you, in turn, prepared... this.”

Roland paled, a tremor shaking his hand that pained Will to see.

“If I was to judge the situation solely by what was written there, I would think myself nothing more than a means to an end,” Will said. “That your assurances of affection and attachment to me were little more than placatory manipulations meant to keep me content until I could bear Hannibal’s child.”

“You know that isn’t true,” Roland said, his hands falling to his lap, his golden eyes heavy with sorrow. “You know Hannibal well enough by now to realize he is stubborn and proud beyond all sense. This was the only way I could find to bring the two of you together again. I prayed every moment of every day since his return that you would sit before me as you did on your return—two beautiful young people in the first flush of love.”

Will cocked his head, refusing to be put off by flattery.
“It is difficult for me to think that the time we have spent here in the country with only one another's company held so little sway in your heart that you would draw up such a cruel arrangement,” Will said, his voice soft and low but firm. “A separation, Grandfather? Not just removing Hartford from my care, but banishment, as well? Was all of my effort on your behalf so meaningless? Would my own grandfather have approved of this?”

Roland flinched at the mention of Charles, pain so heavy in his pale face that Will regretted his words the moment he said them.

“I apologize,” he whispered, looking aside. “I should not have mentioned him. I came here to better understand what prompted you, Grandfather, not to upset you.”

“If there is any lesson life has taught me which is valuable enough to pass on, it’s to never apologize when one is correct,” Roland said, the richness of his Alpha voice muted with unhappiness. “Charles would, indeed, have been disappointed in me, just as you are. He would look at me that same way, reproachful and sad. It was worse than any punishment my father or tutors could manage. But I think were he alive today, he would see why I have taken such steps.”

He rallied, lifting his face to meet Will’s gaze, unflinching and unrepentant as only an Alpha could ever manage.

“Your efforts here at Hartford have and always will be profoundly appreciated and I would never have allowed you to be thrown from Hartford House, Will. I had every faith that Hannibal would come to be just as smitten and in love with you as he is today,” Roland said, his mouth bowing in a frown. “Yet if things had continued to be so cold and unkind between you, that separation was as much for your sake as for his. I have made arrangements through Mr. Stammets, witnessed by Margaret and Robert, that leave Marham Heath and its income to you in its entirety, along with a substantial allowance that would see you comfortably through the rest of your days.”

Will’s eyes widened in shock, his surprise overshadowing his upset. The paperwork Hannibal had presented to him had contained only details of his own assets and intentions, not of Roland’s, and Will was entirely unprepared to hear him say such a thing.

“Considering what you have sacrificed here, your hard work in tending to the estate, and the life both Hannibal and I had sentenced you to,” Roland said, some of his tension easing when he saw Will’s reaction, “I wanted you kept in comfort with a home you had wealth enough to rebuild as you pleased.”

Will frowned, but it was thoughtful, considering, and he admitted, “You cannot claim you were doing what was best for me.”

“I was doing what was best for the family, as I must,” Grandfather said. “The Lecters need an heir. I had to put that need above all others, but once accomplished I saw to the needs of my beloved grandchildren equally. I made a contract which granted Hannibal his freedom and unburdened you of him in return to pursue your individual interests.”

Will said nothing, merely mulled the explanations over, informed but by no means mollified.

“My dear, you have been as cherished and important to me as Hannibal himself is,” Grandfather said, ruefully adding, “which unfortunately means I am not above heavy-handed tactics when it comes to ensuring you take your rightful place. I am too old to need forgiveness, too jaded to begrudge you your anger with me, and I have the luxury of never having to explain myself to anyone, but I hope you will always bear in mind that your happiness and safety are foremost in my thoughts, however cruel my actions may seem.”

“I know, Grandfather,” Will said, because he did. His Gift had made him tender towards Roland from their very first meeting, and six years of being together had given him precious insight into a man whose actions were so often harsh, decisions made for the good of the family outweighing those made from softness of heart or generous affection. It was no easy task being the head of a noble family; Will only hoped that when Hannibal took his place as Duke, they could manage things with less collateral damage than the old and impatient Alpha before him could muster. “You wound, but always with reason. Yet you must see how this has hurt me?”

“I do see it, my dear, and regret the necessity,” Roland said, faint yearning in his lined and aged face. “I love you as my very own, Will. I would not hurt you for the world, but if I must hurt you in order to give you the world, then I shall.”

It was harsh but not unexpected, and Will nodded, trying to reconcile his own affections for Grandfather with his new understanding of the man’s capacity to maneuver those around him like nothing more than pawns.

“I understand that Hannibal later reversed his decision regarding this paper?”
“Yes,” Roland said, unhesitating. “That day you took your crop to him, he came to me and requested that the Addendum be destroyed. He wanted Hartford to remain in your keeping.”

“Check the date,” Will softly instructed, waiting patiently while Grandfather did so. He was relieved to see the bewilderment on his face when he saw the date that had been written.

“This is wrong,” Roland said, entirely perplexed. “The Addendum was drawn up before Hannibal’s return and signed by him the very hour he arrived. This date is false, Will.”

“Hannibal confessed as much,” Will said, handing over the rest of the paperwork. “He took steps to have the Addendum nullified in case that copy ever surfaced, but it would seem that it isn’t the true copy at all. I have had admittedly limited interactions with Mr. Buddish, but I am certain he would never make such a costly mistake with the dates. I expect he could easily confirm that this is a forgery, a despicable attempt to make me believe Hannibal was only after an heir and nothing else.”

“You know that isn’t the case,” Grandfather said, not looking at the other documents as yet, but at Will. “There is very little my grandson wouldn’t do for you, Will. I can see it in how he looks at you, how he speaks of you. His attachment to you is the truth, honest and absolute, and I hope that you will one day become equally attached to him.”

“I’m developing a certain fondness for him,” Will said, and when he smiled, Roland smiled in return. “I am very disappointed in you, however, Grandfather. I wish you had never taken any steps to maneuver Hannibal into such a position that it nearly put all of us in doubt of the other’s affections. I understand why you did it, I simply cannot approve.”

“If you understand even a little, then that is all I can ask for,” Roland said, reaching out to lay his hand over Will’s, the touch light but warm. “I am too old to worry about living with the consequences, my dear. It tends to make one a bit reckless.”

“I think,” Will said, turning his hand to give Roland’s a soft squeeze, his blue eyes filled with affection, “that you’ve many a long year ahead of you, Grandfather, to behave too recklessly. You must wait for the pattering of those little feet we agreed upon, mustn’t you?”

Roland grinned, his Alpha fangs bared behind his beard, and said, “Yes, I must!”

The door opened, Zeller admitting Hannibal, whose drawn down eyebrows and slight frown spoke of a less than pleasant encounter with his grandfather’s valet. Winston trotted in beside him, his wagging tail gaining force when he saw Will.

“Zeller told me this morning that you had returned, my boy,” Grandfather said, releasing Will’s hand to straighten, arms out for an embrace Hannibal swiftly bent to offer.

Will smiled as Grandfather briefly clasped Hannibal to him, giving him a firm pounding on the back that Hannibal bore with wounded dignity before he straightened and looked at Will.

“Is something the matter?” Will asked, recognizing that thunderous expression.

“I merely had words with Zeller regarding a certain incident he advised you on. The audacity of that man never ceases to amaze me! Have I come at a bad time?” he asked, looking towards Grandfather as well. “Have the two of you spoken?”

“We have,” Will confirmed, gesturing Winston to his side to stroke his head. He glanced over briefly when Zeller admitted a pair of pretty maids to lay breakfast on Grandfather’s small table just next to his bed. Zeller himself settled a tray over Roland’s lap, leaving Hannibal and Will to seat themselves or not as they pleased. When he left the room with the maids, he very deliberately left the door standing open.

“All this business with documents vanishing and being altered,” Grandfather said, giving the Addendum an unhappy shake. “It makes me very uneasy!”

“Even more uneasy when we consider that they managed to leave it in Will’s suite,” Hannibal remarked, he and Will taking their seats at the small table while Winston sat at attention next to Hannibal’s chair, hopeful for treats. “Clearly it was someone who knows the House and grounds well.”

“Could it have been Matthew Brown?” Grandfather asked, paling to a ghostly white.

“The staff wouldn’t dare allow him close with all our suspicions falling on him,” Hannibal said, adding with concern, “Take some of your honey water, Grandfather; you’ve gone quite pale. Should I call for Zeller?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” Roland said, doing as he was bidden. He lifted his steaming cup of hot honey water and sipped it, his hand wobbling dangerously. “Matthew is the only one I can think of who has intimate knowledge of Hartford and a reason—false though it may be—to orchestrate such a misunderstanding. If not him, then who?”
“I have no idea who did so, or when they did so, but I can only assume it was with the intention to drive a wedge between me and both of you, which,” Will said, worried by Grandfather’s persistent frailty, “considering the content, was not difficult to imagine.”

“Well, it was truly a terrible shock to you, as you said,” Grandfather said, settling his cup with care. “I will gladly make it up to you, Will, in any way you wish.”

“Trust me, Grandfather, I have already been soundly punished for our transgressions,” Hannibal said, earning himself a swift kick to the shin beneath the table when he added, “I feared I might never leave my bed alive.”

“Well, that Addendum has created quite a plethora of issues we must now task ourselves with resolving,” Will said, sipping his coffee and determined to ignore his husband’s vague reference to his thighs. He was relieved that the breakfast odors didn’t bother him as they had yesterday, though arguably there was little to offend when breakfast was mostly bland, cautious foods meant to tempt Grandfather back to good health.

“And I have already taken steps,” Hannibal said, eager to bring the other paperwork to Grandfather’s attention. “If you’ll look through those, Grandfather, I’ll need you to witness the changes I’ve made. We’ll call Mr. Stammets up and have him carry them personally to Mr. Buddish for filing.”

“And I have made my own additions to the paper regarding Hartford House in the notations below,” Will went on, taking another small sip from his cup and stirring his porridge. “Hartford will be part of the Lecter inheritance. If Hannibal refuses to take ownership in my favor, I wanted it explicitly stated that I am holding it in trust for our heir. This is your ancestral home and I will not have some accident of law remove it from your keeping.”

Grandfather frowned and read the paper in question, his breakfast forgotten. The furrow in his brow deepened the more he read, then cleared as reached the changes Will had made this morning. Satisfied, he nodded to himself before looking through the additions to Hannibal’s will and the legal actions he’d taken to bring Will’s own personal power on par with his own in terms of monetary allotments and decision-making processes.

“Mr. Buddish has done excellent work with this,” he said, peering at Hannibal over the documents. “He did make you aware of the settlements I had created on Will’s behalf?”

“He did, but I wanted to create my own,” Hannibal said, feeling Winston’s muzzle come to rest on his thigh, hopeful for a scone. “I never took any steps after our marriage, after all. Will now has the rights he is owed as my spouse and the privileges he is due. I only hope I can prevail upon him to use them… with a little wheedling, of course.”

“Oh, you know I have no interest in burning through your fortune. All I ever need is a stream, Hannibal,” Will said, casting a content look out the window in the direction of the river, wishing he were about to go fishing rather than host a large party.

“I live in quiet terror of your skill as a fisherman, Will,” Hannibal said, chuckling when he thought of the dinner they’d shared, the offending trout that had slapped him and then been served to him on a bed of greens.

“The catch that I currently have is quite a good one,” Will said, his flashing eyes returning to his husband. “Or so I’ve been told.”

“And by whom, pray tell?”

“Hannibal, please do not needle your husband,” Grandfather warned, distracted from the paperwork by his grandchildren. He gave Hannibal a repressive look and said, “I have no desire for there to be another Carpet Incident when our guests are due to start arriving!”

“Grandfather, I have no intentions of provoking Will, nor in tumbling him on carpets,” Hannibal said, murmuring into his coffee cup, “not that one particularly, anyhow.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing, Grandfather,” Will said, rising to pour some milk for the suspicious old Alpha. “We shall both of us be at our best, I promise you.”

“That is precisely what scares me!” Grandfather pointed out, handing the documents to Will so that he could take up his spoon, giving the porridge a woeful look. “Perhaps a bite of scone?”

“No,” Zeller said, poking his head into the open doorway to level an offended, disapproving stare at all three of them. “No scones.”
“Cheeky,” Grandfather breathed, taking a bite of his porridge. “I meant to ask you, Will, if you found anything amiss in those financial papers of Lord Rathmore’s?”

“Nothing particularly,” Will said, resuming his seat to finish his porridge, finding it very settling and satisfying to his still delicate stomach. “But I did notice that Mr. Brauner, my father’s solicitor, is listed among Mr. Verger’s visitors and I found that noteworthy.”

“That is rather interesting,” Hannibal said, arching a brow at Will, his fingers beginning to tap a restless rhythm on the fine tablecloth. “What on earth would he be doing visiting Mr. Verger?”

“I have asked myself that same question,” Will said, glancing from Hannibal to Grandfather. “There is the possibility that he represented some appeal of Mr. Verger’s, being a very good solicitor and well known in the region, but I find that very difficult to support given that Mr. Verger would have ample access to much more experienced solicitors in the Capital. Yet, I cannot find a single reason why my father would engage him to contact Mr. Verger. There is very little chance they ever knew one another and Mr. Verger seemed to have no knowledge of my family when I first arrived.”

“Well, I for one should like to know,” Grandfather remarked, doing justice to the porridge despite his protests.

“Short of stealing into his office and absconding with the paperwork,” Hannibal said, wondering if his grandfather intended just such a thing, “there is no way to know. He has no reason or right to share any client information, be it Lord Reddig’s or Mr. Verger’s.”

“Leave those details to me, please, my dear,” Grandfather said, sipping his milk. “All the two of you need to occupy yourselves with is giving the family an heir before the year is out.”

Will had, luckily, just swallowed his sip of coffee but his cheeks lit up with a pretty pink blush and he cleared his throat, telling them, “On that note, I shall excuse myself to speak with Mrs. Henderson and run a final check on the rooms.”

He rose, beautiful and collected, his scent so heady and mouth-watering that it was all Hannibal could do not to nip him when he kissed Will’s hand in parting. As it stood, he couldn’t resist opening his lips over Will’s wrist to taste him, rich and full against his tongue. It was as if Will’s heat had never left him, lingering in the fertile note to his scent and driving Hannibal to distraction with its promise.

“Heavens, boy, pick your jaw up,” Grandfather scolded, chuckling when Hannibal started, somewhat surprised to find that Will had already gone, leaving only his teasing perfume in the air.

Grandfather grinned, waggling his heavy eyebrows, and Hannibal mustered a blush, saying with a touch of self-conscious reproach, “Stop that, you randy old goat!”

“You didn’t inherit your appetites from your father, Hannibal,” Roland pointed out, settling against the pillows with a content sigh. “I couldn’t be more pleased that he’s off of those terrible tonics and finally living in a way that makes him comfortable with who he is. There were many nights I would lay awake worrying on just that count, convinced I had sentenced him to a lifetime of lonely isolation, pretending to be a beta male because he was too ashamed to be himself.”

“I spend every moment countering the beliefs both his experiences as well as I myself have taught him,” Hannibal said, surprised to see Winston peeking up at him when he sat back down. It was solely for a scone, however, and once Hannibal handed one to him, the little bounder dashed off in Will’s wake, greedily gobbling it up. “I have promised to devote myself to his happiness, Grandfather, and that devotion makes me plead with you now—sign that document. Sign it, witness the others, and put my mind to rest that should anything happen to me, Will has every luxury to console him in my place.”

“You’re sorely off the mark if you believe even a single penny would console him,” Grandfather said, cocking his head as he gazed at his grandson. “Will would much rather have a quiet life spent in peaceful, honest work than he would spending his days in idle luxury... but you know that, Hannibal. I know that you know that.”

“I do,” Hannibal said, his smile sad and distant. “His needs are so few and simple—he truly would be content with only a stream to fish in. I suppose the only one I am attempting to console is myself, Grandfather. I feel as if there isn’t enough of me to ever make up for what I’ve done to him, as if even a lifetime of love and dedication would barely begin to touch the damage I have inflicted. What else do I have to offer him but worldly goods? What else can I do but enrich him to the point that if and when he finds someone who is worthy of his heart, he has the financial security to seek a union with them, no matter their own circumstances?”
Grandfather’s eyes darkened a little with pain, a faint touch of worry tingeing his words when he said, “You speak as if you expect to leave him, Hannibal... or else be taken from him.”

“Not if I can help it, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, mouth pursing in a frown as he picked at a crumb on his pant leg. He could not bring himself to look up at the old Alpha when he quietly said, “Will has a decision he has yet to make, Grandfather. I told him that should he wish to be parted from me to seek his own life on his own terms without me holding him back, then all he needs to do is say so.”

There was a long silence following that statement, contemplative and heavy.

“So you made him independently rich in order to enable that decision,” Grandfather said, sighing heavily. “Not everything that brings you happiness in life must be pushed away, Hannibal. Not everything you take pleasure in will be taken from you. The lesson Mischa’s death has taught you does not apply to Will.”

“I know that, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, turning his head to look out the window because it was easier than meeting his grandfather’s eyes. “I’m not pushing him away. I’m giving him the means to live as he pleases and praying with every breath that I will be enough, in the end. I’m praying with every breath that he will choose me.”

“He will, my dear,” Grandfather said, tears shimmering in his golden eyes. His hand trembled when he groped for Hannibal’s own, and Hannibal moved to take it, holding it with care. “Love doesn’t conquer all, Hannibal, but hard work, dedication, and loyalty certainly can conquer far more than we properly realize. Give him everything in you, even the bad, and he will find you every bit the prize that you find him in return.”

“Thank you, Grandfather,” Hannibal breathed, kissing his cold knuckles with a smile and pressing his hand to his face, a simple gesture of affection for the Alpha who had been more a father to him than the man who had sired him.

“Now run along, Hannibal,” Roland said, turning his hand against Hannibal’s cheek to pat him, giving the corner of his mouth a gentle pinch and tug. “Help Will see to the preparations and get yourself ready. I think a nap is in order for me if I wish to be at my best this evening.”

“Yes, Grandfather,” Hannibal said, lowering his hand with care and rising, his happy smile tugging at Roland’s weary old heart, the echo of the son he’d loved and battled in equal measure reflected in the face of the grandson he adored. “Get your rest.”

He left, moving with the swift, purposeful stride so characteristic of him. A heartbeat after he passed the doorway, Zeller came slinking in to gather up their breakfast dishes. He lifted the tray from Roland’s lap and asked, “You want me to go visit Mr. Brauner?”

“Yes, I think you’d best do so, Zeller,” Roland said, gesturing at the papers that had been left behind for him. “Put those in my safe before you go, please, and I want you to get to the bottom of this issue we have of things disappearing and reappearing when they should be doing nothing of the sort.”

“I’ll have to have some letters,” Zeller said, unconcerned. He poked at the leftover scones and then ate one in two bites, ignoring Roland’s repressive glare. “Should I send some to Mr. Brauner?”

“I’ll leave that to your discretion,” Roland said, stifling a yawn. “Someone in this house is interfering with our correspondence and they are particularly interested in that which pertains to Will. We’ll see what arrives and when, what has been opened and what hasn’t, and what never arrives at all.”

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“You have to promise me you’ll mind Jimmy,” Zeller warned. “No scones, none of that nonsense, agreed?”

“Agreed,” Roland said, puffing a little at the indignities of getting old and being forced to allow pups like his pert valet to order him about, even if it was for his own good. “Just settle it quickly! Mr. Price needs to look after Will and I shouldn’t steal too much of his time.”

Zeller licked the crumbs from his fingers and graced Roland with a smug smile, telling him, “I’ll take care of it.”

“I know you will, you ornery boy,” Roland said, smiling when Zeller very thoughtfully tucked him in to sleep.

It seemed there were endless things to do before their guests began to arrive. A good portion of them would be staying, having traveled to the country on Grandfather’s invitation to attend his party. It was not a small group, but it was select and the closer the hour drew the more Will’s nerves began to grasp the enormity of this night.
It would not just be his father he would be judged by, but some of Grandfather’s fellow Peers, the extended Lecter family, and even some dignitaries from Lietuva, who would be traveling an impressive distance to relay their impression of him to Hannibal’s grandparents, who were unable to undertake such a journey at their advanced age.

Will was silent and solemn as Jimmy helped him to dress, not in the beautiful outfit he and Nichola had chosen for dinner, but in the less elaborate, male-patterned clothing with its subtle Omegan touches—the slightly more exaggerated flare of his jacket tails, the nipped in waist that emphasized the firm shape of his body, the open collar of his jacket over a fine blouse with his mother’s brooch nestled just above his heart. The colors were not his usual somber, funeral choices, but a patterned, shimmering pale blue over a gold-embroidered waistcoat and white shirt.

“I feel like a peacock,” Will breathed, his nerves showing in the tightness of his smile.

“You shouldn’t, my Lord,” Jimmy said, smoothing his watch chain and bending to wipe an offending speck of dust from the toe of Will’s boots, polished to such a shine he could see his own reflection in the smooth leather. “This is the height of taste and fashion and Berger assures me it complements your husband’s choice. I can say with utter honesty that you look very handsome, indeed.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will said, doing his best not to fiddle with his valet’s fine work.

Jimmy rose with a wide smile, hands folded in front of him, proud as a mother hen.

“I mean it, my Lord,” he said, nodding with satisfaction at the picture Will made. “You are enchanting and unmistakable, and you have grown into yourself so well. I’m just so proud of you.”

“My Lord,” Jimmy said, heaving a happy sigh, “it has been my absolute pleasure. And I am truly looking forward to the day when there are at least five more little Lords Clarges running around for me to watch over!”

Will’s startled, laughing response was cut short by a knock on the door, which Jimmy hastened to answer. Will stayed where he was, smoothing his coat, nervous that their guests might have started to arrive.

Instead, Jimmy returned holding one end of a large strongbox with a footman on the other end. They placed it on Will’s vanity and Jimmy dismissed the boy, fishing a key from his pocket to open it.

“Has Hannibal decided that my jewelry box won’t do?” Will asked, drawing closer as Jimmy opened the lock and slid it free.

Will got a glimpse of several smaller boxes within before he made himself look down at the note. It wasn’t sealed, and the ink was still damp, a fact which brought a smile to his lips.

Will

Though I know that no jewels could ever compare to the changing colors of your eyes, and that there is no adornment which could ever rival the purity to be found in the curve of your smile, I hope that you will accept these on the chance that they will amuse you, and in doing so endear me to you... just a little.

Yours always and forever,

Hannibal

PS: Might I suggest the sapphires? Though a pearl necklace would truly become you.

Will read the last line with a frown, asking, “Did his Lordship send pearls, Jimmy?”

“No, but I think he might find it a little inadequate for the gifts he’s sent,” Jimmy said, deftly plucking a note up from within the box to hand it to Will.

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Will, suddenly reminded of their early morning tryst in which pearls had been similarly referenced, blushed bright pink and hastily stuffed the note back into the box, afraid he would either burst out laughing or catch fire from embarrassment, one.

“My Lord?” Jimmy inquired, as good-natured in his bafflement as he was in all things.

“Forgive me, Jimmy,” Will said, suppressing his laughter with difficulty. “My husband is inclined to see me in the sapphires this evening, if you could have them readied?”
“Certainly, my Lord!” Jimmy said, delighted by the bounty. “I shall have to fetch another box from the attic! There is so very much! I have never seen such dark rubies, they’re nearly black! Oh, my, just so much...”

Will watched the jewelry being unpacked and transferred to the dressing room, everything from necklaces to bracelets, brooches to rings, and even ear bobs which made him fondle his earlobe with contemplation.

Another knock came at the door, earning a yip from Winston, and Will called, “I’ll get it, Jimmy.”

He expected another footman, but it was Mr. Berger, red-faced and smiling and dignified.

“His Lordship asks if you might join him in his suite for tea, my Lord.”

“Tea?” Will echoed, at a loss. “Now?”

“Yes, m’Lord, before the vultures get here, he says,” Berger said, cracking a smile. “He just wants a quiet moment with you before the night is sewn up, m’Lord.”

“There’s plenty of time,” Jimmy volunteered, returning from the dressing room to gather a few more pieces. “Mr. Berger, could you send someone up to get the third Duchess’ jewelry armoire? The third, mind you, not the fourth. Hers was abysmally small.”

“M’Lord?” Berger inquired, and Will nodded his permission before slipping out into the hallway, saying, “Stay with Jimmy, Winston.”

It was somewhat close to time to be indulging in tea before their guests arrived, but just the thought that Hannibal wanted to squeeze in a moment of privacy beforehand brought a smile to Will’s face. He touched his lips with his fingertips, marveling at how easily it came to him these days. Smiling was no longer a painful pull of muscles stiff with disuse, and the world seemed filled with things to delight him and inspire his happiness.

He stood outside of Hannibal’s suite for a long, silent moment, nodding absently when Mr. Berger bustled past to fetch some help, just thinking of the boy he’d been. So many years ago he had crammed himself in the corner of his room, terrified and heartsick in a strange and frightening new place, feeling as if there would never be another shaft of sunlight to penetrate the dreary isolation that had encapsulated his world.

Now he was loved by a man who would valiantly move mountains to please him, was recognized as Lord Clarges himself, his coffers overflowing with wealth he intended to pass down to children he never imagined he would bear. More, the darkness of his world had faded, midnight becoming dawn and now bright as day, a beautiful golden glow that throbbed inside of him, fed by the bond he never meant to form.

So much of what had happened between them was accident rather than design, but all of it was theirs alone, even the terrible things, welding them together in shared experiences to grant them each knowledge of the other that no one else could ever imagine.

After all of these years, he was loved and happy, a precious member of a warm and welcoming family with a home that was his for the rest of his life—his childish dreams realized with such excess that it left him breathless.

The door opened before him, startling him, and when he blinked, hot tears rolled down his cheeks despite his wide smile. Hannibal, monetarily frozen, roused himself to reach out and grasp Will by the hand. He pulled him inside and closed the door against prying eyes before he cupped Will’s face in his hands, peering down at him to puzzle out what he was seeing.

“I had the strangest feeling you were happy,” he whispered, naming the reason why he’d gone to the door in the first place, certain that Will was there. He wiped at Will’s cheeks, gathering his tears up with gentle fingertips and then with gentle kisses, murmuring, “Tell me what has hurt you, Will. Tell me and I will fix it.”

“Nothing,” Will said, his voice raspy with tears. He uttered a soft, short laugh and grasped Hannibal’s arms, telling him, “I am happy, Hannibal. That’s all.”

The bond surged again, a spike of pleasure and delight and relief that made Will laugh again, closing his eyes as his lids were kissed and his tears were sipped from his lashes.

“As if it is such a small thing,” Hannibal purred, easing back to fish his handkerchief out and wipe Will’s face. “I hope every day of our lives together brings you to tears with happiness, Will.”

“There is a very good chance it will,” he admitted, embarrassed but still smiling. “Thinking of my father made me remember how desperate I was to escape his control, and the hope I harbored to be part of a family.”
Hannibal wiped away another spill of tears, his smile sad and his heart breaking all over again for the child he had rejected so long ago.

“And now,” Will said, drawing a deep breath to steady himself, his face aglow with joy as he said, “I am.”

Hannibal wrapped both arms around him, squeezing Will up tight to his chest. He stroked Will’s curls, smiling, eyes closed to savor this moment. It was no small victory to hear his mate say such a thing and it gave him hope for the future, for their future together.

They stood in comfortable, content silence while Will composed himself, flushed and half embarrassed, but secure in his husband’s love for him. Hannibal felt him relax and gave Will’s nape a final squeeze before he eased back to cup his face.

“Jimmy will scold me for making you cry,” he murmured, smoothing the faint tracks of tears down Will’s soft cheeks once more with his handkerchief.

“He wouldn’t,” Will said, chuckling softly, taking the handkerchief from him and following Hannibal’s touch with his own to wipe at his face. “He would, however, heartily disapprove and leave you in no doubt about it. He is a force to be reckoned with.”

“I expect so,” Hannibal said, amused. He pressed his thumb to Will’s lower lip and traced the curve of it up to the corner of his mouth before asking, “Better?”

“Calmer,” Will said, drawing a deep breath and tucking Hannibal’s handkerchief into his sleeve. “I can’t think what’s gotten into me recently. It isn’t like me to be so easily overwrought.”

“Your self control would put a Stoic to shame; I think you’re due a little indulgence in your emotions after being kept from them for so many years, Will,” Hannibal said, following the touch with a soft kiss. “The imminent appearance of your father again after all of this time would be enough to try anyone’s mettle. Anything you need to do in order to prepare for that is entirely warranted, I should think.”

He urged Will to his small seating area where a tea set was already laid out—two unfamiliar cups and a steaming pot with a simple plate of biscuits, a very modest offering in all but one Will welcomed. He sat carefully, smoothing his coat beneath him and arranging his jacket as he settled back, unable to feel self-conscious around his husband. The extra flounce took some getting used to, but by the gleam in his husband’s amber eyes, it would be worth the hassle.

“I wanted to tell you how stunning you looked when I first saw you standing there in my doorway, but I found myself breathless at the sight of you,” Hannibal told him, pouring for them both and handing Will his cup before taking his seat. He had moved the chairs, arranging them just a little closer to one another, and settled his booted feet almost touching Will’s crossed ankles. “I’ll remedy that now—you look exquisite, Will.”

“Thank you,” Will said, hiding his smile behind his teacup as he took a sip, his blue eyes wandering over Hannibal’s own afternoon outfit. It did match his own, as Jimmy had said, the soft hues complementing the blue tones in his jacket, muted but for the slight sheen of a pattern, an interlocking design Will found fascinating. “I had to do justice to the fine wardrobe my husband so generously supplied me... after some wheedling, of course.”

“Of course,” Hannibal agreed, pleased and not afraid to show it. He sipped his own tea, eager to share his surprise with Will. “Perhaps I can wheedle you in exchange? As your knees are safely covered and your stockings out of sight, I might yet keep my wits about me.”

Will laughed, the sound trailing off on a slight smile that prompted Hannibal to ask, “What are you thinking of?”

“How much things have changed,” Will said, thoughtfully swirling his tea, which was not at all bitter and just as he liked it. “How easy it is to laugh now, how readily I smile. I can see how much I’ve changed you, and I see how much you’ve changed me in return.”

“For the better, I pray,” Hannibal softly said, watching him.

Will grinned, and said, “Who knows?”

Hannibal chuckled, sighing a little and content just to watch him sip his tea. In a few short moments he had the pleasure of seeing Will’s eyebrows draw down and his blue eyes squint as he stared down into his cup.

“How Hannibal?” Will asked, turning the cup around and tilting it, seeing that there was, in fact, something painted within. He hastily gulped the last swallow of his tea and took another look, bursting into surprised, raspy laughter.

Painted into the bowl of the teacup was the arched body of a trout, curved with fins outstretched as if swimming.
Or being flung at someone's head.

“Hannibal, what on earth?” he asked, laughing again as he took a look at the outer design, finding the pattern resolved itself into more trout swimming and leaping in a stylized river. He angled a wry look at his husband, who managed to look both aggrieved and amused at the same time, and said, “Trout? Shall I be forever haunted by one impulsive act of frustration?”

“I am sorry, Will, but I’m afraid it made quite an impact,” Hannibal said, so somber and serious that Will laughed again, turning the teacup in his hands to see the full scene and taking another peek within at the curled trout. “I felt such a meaningful sacrifice deserved immortalizing in a tea set for two.”

“Just for two?” Will questioned, turning his attention to the pot which, as he suspected, held another pattern of river-bound trout, the pattern so subtle even he had not remarked it at first.

“Yes, just for two,” Hannibal said, shifting to scoot the box from Gideon and Garnets out from beneath his seat.

“That’s very brave of you, considering,” Will said, his smile dimming as he thought of the teacup he’d smashed, one of only two, disrupting the set forever.

“This is my gift to you,” Hannibal said, pleased he’d managed to surprise his mate. “But I do have something else you might like, if you’re interested?”

Will's eyes snapped to his, wide and eager, answer enough for Hannibal to scoop the box up as he stood. He settled it in Will's lap and went down on one knee at his side, whispering, “I hope you'll like it.”

Heart hammering, Will lifted the lid on the box and for a moment he could not make sense of what he saw. When he did finally realize, he pressed his hand to his lips, unable to speak for a long, painful moment.

The shattered teacup had come together again, nestled into soft, fine velvet atop a bed of wool. He reached in with trembling fingers and touched it, tracing the seams of gold that told the story of its suffering, the force with which it had been flung to the ground. It was an act which should have destroyed it.

But it hadn’t.

It survived despite the insult, its wounds healed to scars, shimmering in the fading daylight.

“You brought it back together,” he whispered, the words tremulous. He couldn’t look at Hannibal, didn’t dare to for fear he himself would fall apart, cracking into a million tiny pieces all over again.

But his scars were already filled with gold, his pieces pulled together, sewn and mended and sealed against harm by the love this man held for him, every moment of it a gift that was treasured and celebrated with pure delight.

“I promised you I would,” Hannibal purred, eyes sweeping half closed when Will’s hand moved from his mouth and his beautiful mate leaned over him to embrace him. He trembled so hard against Hannibal that all he could do was breathe, “I love you, Will. And I swear to you, someday I will manage to undo the damage I have done to you.”

Will’s arm tightened against his jaw as he shifted, lifting his head to cradle the cup in his hand before Hannibal.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, pleasure tingeing every word.

“I know it isn’t like it was before—”

“Who ever is?” Will asked, a soft laugh floating in his voice. “Who ever is, Hannibal? It’s beautiful, absolutely beautiful. I can never take back what happened to it or bring back those pieces that were lost, but the empty spaces have been filled and the teacup has come together again.”

He eased back to look down into Hannibal’s face, joy shining in his eyes, his happiness so exquisite that it took Hannibal’s breath away all over again.

“I never thought I would see such a thing, Hannibal. I thought it was destroyed beyond repair,” he said, and bent to press a kiss to Hannibal’s forehead, lingering and soft. “Thank you for keeping your promise. Thank you for giving it back to me.”

“I always will,” Hannibal said, shifting up to kiss the tip of his nose. “As many times as it takes, for as long as it takes, night and day until I draw my last breath, Will.”

Will tipped his head and their mouths met in a soft kiss, the cup between them, safely in Will’s hands. It was a short, sweet kiss, a gentle show of tenderness, and when Will pulled back, he said, “Hannibal... I lo—”

A knock came at the door, interrupting them.

“Yes?” Hannibal whispered, urging him to finish, but Will only shook his head, silent and almost chastened, the cup cradled to his chest. Crestfallen, Hannibal got to his feet and called, “This had better be supremely important.”
The door opened, admitting Mr. Berger, who looked as if he would rather be on a storm-tossed ship rather than intruding on them just now, but he did his duty all the same and said, “There’s a coach coming down the lane, my Lords.”

“Oh! It is later than I realized,” Will said, flustered by his interrupted confession. He busied himself putting the cup back into its box and closed it up, safe and secure within.

“Who is it?” Hannibal asked, offering Will a hand as he stood, both of them falling still with unease when the answer came.

“It’s Lord Reddig, my Lords.”

Will took a deep breath, pulling Hannibal’s Alpha scent deep into his lungs. It calmed him, but he made no move to leave. He simply stood there, the box with its teacup pressed to his chest, the color instantly drained from his cheeks.

“Thank you, Berger,” Hannibal said, shooing his valet out. He returned to Will and cupped his face, telling him, “I will go down.”

“Hannibal—”

“I will go down,” Hannibal said again, coaxingly. “You take all the time you need, and I will be there when you’re ready.”

Will frowned and said, “I’ll not let you fight my battles for me, Hannibal.”

“For you? Never,” Hannibal said, baring the tips of his Alpha fangs in a small smile. “But together? We could slay dragons together, Will. Your father is hardly that.”

He could sense Will’s reluctance and pressed ahead, saying, “You’re my husband, Will. Your battles are my battles, just as mine are yours. That means when you tire, I fight in your place, as you would in mine. There is no weakness in tiring, having fought alone for so long.”

Will’s eyes held his, but as difficult as it was he finally nodded and said, “I’ll be down in a moment, I just need to put this away someplace safe.”

Hannibal smiled, relieved, and headed towards the door. He paused there on his way out, turning when Will said, “Hannibal?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you,” he said, and shifted the box. “For... everything.”

“You never need to thank me, Will,” Hannibal said back to him with a smile. He moved out into the hallway, closing the door behind him, leaving Will with a secretive smile, clutching the box like a lifeline in his hand.

Grandfather was already firmly situated in the parlor, his wheelchair parked with wide clearance on either side for Hannibal and Will. Zeller was nowhere to be seen, Hannibal noted, which meant either Grandfather was feeling well enough to handle the chair himself, or else he’d sent him off somewhere out of sight. He certainly looked a world better, though fragile and drawn.

“Ahh! Hannibal, there you are!” Grandfather called, his smile fading as he asked, “Where is Will?”

“On his way down,” Hannibal said, moving to greet Mina, who reclined on the settee in an artful pose. He kissed her hand, saying, “You look very lovely, Lady Rathmore.”

“Thank you, Hannibal, dear,” she said, pleased. “I was very pressed to have anything decent to wear for dinner tonight! With the two of you gone, I spent every waking minute ensuring His Grace’s party was prepared for.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal said, his smile tight and difficult to summon. “I’m sure Mrs. Henderson and Mr. Hawkes are extraordinarily pleased they could manage.”

He moved to Grandfather’s side, saying, “Berger said it was Lord Reddig?”

“There was some sort of happenstance at the head of the lane,” Grandfather said, straining a glance at the door, eager to see his guests. “The Dimmonds are now in the lead.”

“That will please them,” Hannibal said, grinning. “Aunt Grace likes nothing more than to be the first to arrive and last to leave.”
“Lady Bredon is always such a delight,” Mina said, turning where she sat to better speak with them both. “She is ever so companionable.”

“That is because she has no idea what you ever say to her, Lady Rathmore,” Hannibal chuckled, and Grandfather stifled a laugh, disguising it as a cough.

The door opened to admit Will and Hannibal breathed, “I had hoped to have his father in hand before he came down.”

“Why, Hannibal, whatever do you mean?” Mina asked, perplexed. “That is an odd thing to say, to be sure! First salacious spoons and now taking father in hand! I never seem to understand you.”

“I doubt you ever could,” Hannibal conceded, managing not to sound too boastful. “Luckily, your brother understands me enough for us all.”

Will was the picture of solemn poise coming towards him, his ever-so-faintly Omegan attire highlighting his athletic build, from his broad shoulders to the slight curve of his hips. He was perfectly beautiful to Hannibal, every aspect of his dual gender blending together into a magnificent whole.

“You’re doing it again,” Grandfather whispered, and Hannibal shook himself, a wide, pleased smile curving his lips as Will neared.

“Mina, you look beautiful,” Will said, taking Hannibal’s offered hand and allowing himself to be drawn in at Grandfather’s side. “And Grandfather, you look like you’re in high spirits.”

“I am, my dear,” Roland said, nudging Hannibal over to make room for Will. “I am quite looking forward to the evening! It has been an age since we’ve held an event here at Hartford!”

“Yes, that was badly done of you, Will, keeping His Grace isolated out here with no entertainment at all,” Mina scolded, smoothing her hands up her forearms. “Though how on earth would you have found the time? Running yourself ragged dealing with the estate like a commoner. Father would simply die to hear such a thing!”

“I will be sure to tell him, in that case,” Will said, and Mina gasped, moving at once to the window in scandalized silence. “I am quite looking forward to the evening! It has been an age since we’ve held an event here at Hartford!”

“Yes, that was badly done of you, Will, keeping His Grace isolated out here with no entertainment at all,” Mina scolded, smoothing her hands up her forearms. “Though how on earth would you have found the time? Running yourself ragged dealing with the estate like a commoner. Father would simply die to hear such a thing!”

“I will be sure to tell him, in that case,” Will said, and Mina gasped, moving at once to the window in scandalized silence.

There was movement at the door and Will smiled, delighted to see Anthony and Freddie instead of his father.

“Yes, your favorite has ar—gods above, Miss Lounds, why on earth are you wearing men’s clothing?” Hannibal asked, shocked by the sight of her feminine charms on such display. She matched Anthony as if they had planned their wardrobes, though her tightly braided and bound red hair was still a shocking splash of color.

“Good evening, Lord Clarges,” Freddie said, smiling slightly with her beaming fiance escorting her to greet them. “These are not men’s clothes, I am sure of it, as I ordered them made for myself. That makes them my clothes, does it not?”

Hannibal gathered himself to remark on that and then checked himself, sudden realization flooding him when he saw that her throat was bare in the traditional Omegan fashion. Her scent reached him, then, cinnamon spice with an undertone of apples and that elusive quality which served to tell his senses that she was, in fact, Omegan.

He looked at Will, rendered speechless for a long moment.

“You look very handsome, Freddie,” Will said, reaching out to take her hands in his in greeting.

“Thank you, Lord Clarges,” Freddie said, using his title with obvious relish. “I do still prefer the feminine in address, but Anthony insisted we match.”

“And make a clever announcement?” Hannibal muttered, glaring at his cousin.

“You both look very fine, indeed,” Roland cut in, grasping Anthony’s hand as well as one of Freddie’s. “I want all of my children to behave tonight, am I understood?”

“Far more so than Miss Lounds has been,” Hannibal said, frowning. “Why did no one tell me?”

“Hannibal, even the children knew,” Anthony said, chuckling softly. “You are in a league of your own, old boy. No protests, I trust?”

He said it with a slight, telling sniff that instantly made both Hannibal and Will aware that their time together during his heat had not gone unremarked among the family.

“If you would like to keep that nose,” Hannibal purred. “I would recommend you stick it elsewhere, Anthony. Perhaps, in your—”

“Behave,” Roland warned again. “The wedding will proceed next summer, as scheduled, children. You will hear no protests from anyone, will you?”
“Certainly not from me,” Will said, amused by Hannibal’s ire. “And I doubt Hannibal would protest such a match when he spoke out so publicly in support of Omegas, though he does tend to surprise us all.”

“I am incensed with your opinions of me, all of you,” Hannibal said, put upon. “Naturally, I would not protest. I would never dream of doing such. I only wish Miss Lounds had shown more care in her choice and not settled for such an obvious fool as my cousin.”

“I am very forgiving of his faults, Lord Clarges,” Freddie said with a smile, linking her arm with Anthony’s. “As he is of mine.”

“I cannot believe no one told me,” Hannibal said, whispering it to Will as Anthony and Freddie moved away to speak with Mina.

Will very studiously did not make any sort of eye contact with him, but his lips curved up in a smile he simply could not repress.

“Why would they not tell me?” Hannibal pressed, hurt that his efforts had made no impression on his family.

Roland immediately found the table to his right terribly absorbing, ever so much more so than his grandson’s questions. “Was I really so badly thought of that they feared I would disapprove?” Hannibal asked, pressing his hand to Will’s waist again, where it preferred to linger when they stood so near one another. It was almost as if it had a mind of its own, seeking Will out when he was not aware of it.

“You were and are very highly thought of,” Will corrected him, his skin tightening where Hannibal’s fingers trailed, even through the layers of his clothing. “Which is why they feared your rejection. It is difficult to be looked down on by someone you admire, Lord Clarges.”

Hannibal sniffed slightly at that, and said, “I wouldn’t know.”

Will’s brow arched up over one wry blue eye but he didn’t remark and Hannibal was thoroughly disappointed not to be scolded by him.

Bedelia and her adult children arrived in close attendance with Aunt Grace and Uncle Robert, followed at length by Great-Aunt Margaret in a huff about something or another, by the tone she was taking with Mr. Hawkes.

Bedelia lingered behind as the Dimmonds paid respects to Roland, smiling slightly at Robert’s gushing, delighted greeting to Will while Grace loudly inquired where Anthony had gone off to and somehow managed not to hear anyone say precisely where.

“Things have gone well for you, so I hear,” Bedelia said as Hannibal took her hand, their conversation unheard over the bedlam of Fernhill Dimmonds attempting to sort themselves. She cocked her head Will’s direction, amused by his indulgence of Robert’s persistent attention. “Though not as well as one could hope, perhaps?”

“Bedelia, I could never say how grateful I am for your instruction,” Hannibal said, dropping a kiss on her knuckles and clasping her hand tightly in both of his own. “Without you, I might never have found my way back into Will’s tolerance. And there is every potential for an heir at last.”

A slight, almost imperceptible smile curved her mouth, then. “That is truly the best news we could ask for.”

“I should hope so, after the way you all have hounded me half to death for the better part of two decades!”

“I refuse to apologize for our rightful concern, Hannibal,” she murmured, her half-lidded eyes deceivingly sleepy. “But I am very happy to see that I could assist you with learning the proper way to behave, if only for Will’s sake.”

Hannibal cast a warm glance at Will, who was actually smiling at Uncle Robert, laughing even as his hand was given a boisterous, chivalrous, parting kiss.

“Will,” Bedelia said, turning her attentions at once. “You look so very beautiful, but you always do.”

“Thank you, as do you,” Will said, his good humor partially restored by Uncle Robert’s unfailing high spirits. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Yes,” Bedelia said, smiling, “it is a pleasure. I hope that in the future there will be many more festivities like this one between Fernhill and Hartford.”

“There is the strangest man in the drive, brother!” Aunt Margaret announced as she approached, ostensibly to Roland, but managing to include the entirety of the room. “Very bad-tempered! Very ill-mannered for a gentleman, I should think!”

“Aunt Margaret,” Hannibal said, attempting to hush her.
Will paled, his sudden retreat into silence unremarked by anyone save Hannibal.

“He was scolding his servant in the middle of the lane, Hannibal!” Aunt Margaret complained, thumping her cane imperiously. “You should have him removed at once! I do hope he is not to attend this evening, brother!”

“Excuse me, I should check in with Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, taking an abortive step away that Hannibal promptly blocked as he pawned Aunt Margaret off on Grandfather.

“I will go,” Hannibal told him, patting the small of his back. “You stay with Grandfather and greet our other guests.”

Faced with the reality of seeing his father again, nervous tension swelled up to swallow Will in strained, encompassing dread. Grateful for his husband’s offer, Will could only nod, eyes closing briefly when Hannibal pressed a brief kiss to his forehead. He remained next to Grandfather in uneasy silence as Hannibal left the parlor, hastening to intervene.

There was a bad-tempered man outside, just as Aunt Margaret had said.

Lord Reddig had finally arrived to Hartford House.

Chapter 46

Statton Graham, current Earl of Reddig, was not what Hannibal expected.

He was not monstrous, nor overly tall or impressive. He was, instead, a portly, scowling man with florid cheeks, an air of impatience, and a very solid sense of his own worth who strode into Hartford House with the appraising air of a man studiously cataloging the value of everything in sight. Hannibal half expected a bevy of solicitors following in his wake to take notations, but he was quite alone.

“Lord Reddig,” Hannibal said, his smile tightening with annoyance when the man did not immediately look at him. “How good of you to come. I trust you had no difficulties?”

“None but the inconvenience of travel, Lord Clarges,” Lord Reddig said, looking at Hannibal with frank disapproval. “I have a great deal of business I had to put on hold to accept His Grace’s invitation. I’m sure you find yourself in a similar position with your affairs.”

“As a matter of fact, I do not. I have the luxury of being married to a man who has an excellent head for business,” Hannibal said, his smile wolfish with delight. “I find I never need to worry myself with the details, as Will has everything well in hand.”

Statton blinked, his bushy eyebrows slanting down and his mouth pursing in a spill of lines that made him appear much older than he actually was. He took his gloves and hat off with short, sharp movements, digesting that statement along with Hannibal’s pleased smile.

“I do hope your visit is not too onerous,” Hannibal said, noting Mr. Hawkes’ stiff distaste as he handed off Statton’s gloves, hat, and walking stick to a waiting footman. “I have been informed you very rarely leave Broadriver.”

“By whom, Lord Clarges?” Statton asked, straightening his clothes.

“By Mr. Ingram,” Hannibal said, affecting innocence. “With whom I have fallen somewhat out of contact, but you can rest assured I am keeping a very close eye on him.”

“I’m sure you are,” Statton said, his mouth pursing even more.

“I think you will be very surprised when you see Will again,” Hannibal pressed, unable to resist. “I understand you have not been to visit him since he left to come here?”

Lord Reddig met his gaze directly. Closer now, Hannibal could see that Will very much favored his father—they shared the same peaches and cream complexion, dark brown curls, furrowed brow, bright blue eyes, and excessively stubborn mouth.

“I am not in the habit of making a nuisance of myself, Lord Clarges,” Statton said, gazing around Hartford’s elegant foyer yet again. “Proper children visit their parents, not the other way around.”

“Will has been extraordinarily engaged here at Hartford and I’m afraid we’ve rather monopolized him,” Hannibal said, stretching a touch taller and squaring his shoulders even as another coach rolled to a stop in the drive. “Grandfather does rely on him greatly and could not see fit to spare him. He adores my husband nearly as much as I do, but I’m sure you anticipated such a thing would happen when you gave Will’s hand to me in marriage.”
Statton’s frown edged into a glower, but he made no response to that. He merely patted the bulk of his belly, his rings winking on his plump fingers.

Hannibal spied a sallow, nervous-looking fellow overseeing the disposal of a small trunk, presumably the servant which Aunt Margaret had remarked. Curious he asked, “Have you no more luggage than that?”

“I have brought only what I need to pass the night comfortably,” Statton said, checking his pocket watch. “I do not intend to stay overlong.”

“You are here as our guest, Father,” Hannibal said, relishing the scowl that won him. “Favor us with your company as long as you are comfortable here.”

Statton replaced his watch with a frown, smoothing the cloth over top of it. His clothing was the finest that money could buy, the quality evident in the cut and embellishment, his adornments those of a man unused to denying himself anything.

Hannibal recalled Will’s threadbare riding outfit and shoddy boots his first morning here. He thought of the scars that laced Will’s skin and the abuse he spoke of in the calm tones of one discussing nothing more disturbing than the weather.

He suddenly wanted nothing more than to skewer this plump man like a pig, roast him in a pit, and deliver his heart in tender slices to Will’s waiting plate.

It was a thought that left him smiling as he escorted Lord Reddig towards the parlor to see Will in all of his glory.

The longer Hannibal was gone, the tighter Will’s nerves wound. His ample imagination provided him multiple scenarios regarding the first meeting between his husband and his father, many of which ended in Hannibal taking impulsive action that would stir his family into a dither and send Grandfather spiraling into a temper.

“Excuse me, Grandfather,” Will said, preparing to go and check on them. “I should never have left Hannibal to his own devices.”

“Will, please, do stay,” Grandfather said, disengaging from Uncle Robert to call after him, “Hannibal will control himself, my dear. There is nothing to worry over on that count.”

“Even still—”

Will cut off as Mr. Hawkes opened the door and Hannibal came through, his slight, satisfied smile immediately suspect. He held Will’s gaze for a long moment, the silent support he offered bolstering Will from within, Hannibal’s outpouring of pride reminding Will that he was no longer a scared, abused child, not anymore, not like he had been.

‘We are hosting a party this evening, William,’ Father said, sparing a look at him, his eyes sharp enough to cut. ‘I want you to stay upstairs.’

‘Upstairs?’ Will echoed, tensing when his father’s eyes narrowed.

‘Is there a problem?’ Father asked, disapproval heavy in his rumbling voice.

‘N-no, only... Mina is attending and I thought perhaps... perhaps you would permit me to attend, as well...’

‘You will not be attending,’ Father said, stepling his fingers beneath his chin. ‘The confusion you present to our guests makes them uneasy, William. People dislike being uncomfortable and that is precisely what you make them. Creatures like you, things which refuse definition and cannot be parsed into sense, are unsettling for the rest of us. Your presence would only disturb them unnecessarily.’

Will flinched, dropping his gaze before his father’s, but he could not keep from saying, ‘You make me sound like a monster...’

‘You are not a monster, William,’ Father said, grim. ‘Merely a regrettable mistake...’

Will closed his eyes against the stab of pain that statement still caused him. The man in his memory blurred into the present, a hulking, shimmering shadow whispering how he was less, how he was different, how he was a slap in the face of Nature because of the way She Herself had designed him.

A mistake...
An embarrassment...
A failure...
'I am rich in treasure with you, Will. Should every fortune I have reverse, I could withstand the pain of it if only I have you near me...'

It blossomed through the darkness with the sudden brilliance of the sun breaking through the clouds, chasing away the doubt that threatened to seep in. The earthy flavor of Hannibal’s Alpha scent wrapped around him like an embrace and Will opened his eyes, reaching out for the hand that met his own, fingers tightening and back straightening.

He had worked far too hard for far too long to doubt his own strength now. He was Lord Clarges in his own right, Master of Hartford House and poised to become a Duke at Hannibal’s side and no one—not Fate, not gossip, and certainly not Statton Graham—could ever take away what he had accomplished these past six years.

“And who have we here?” Roland asked, beckoning Statton closer with one elegant hand.

“May I present Lord Reddig, Grandfather?” Hannibal said, slipping against Will’s side to sandwich him between the two Lecter Alphas. Though the rest of their guests gave no indication of taking notice, Hannibal could feel the steady gazes of his family on Statton Graham, curious and assessing. “Lord Reddig, His Grace, the Duke of Westvale.”

“Statton,” Roland said, taking advantage of his position to forego civility. “I assumed you would come earlier to visit with Will before dinner. Did your coach throw a wheel?”

“No, Your Grace, it did not,” Statton said, annoyance flashing across his face.

“Well, there is always next time,” Hannibal pleasantly said. “I expect my husband needs no introduction?”

Statton turned his head, distaste falling over his features like a gossamer veil, once more face to face with the child he’d damaged so greatly and for so long.

Hannibal’s hand squeezed his and Will grasped it tightly, nails biting into his flesh as he looked at the Alpha he had once called father, the familiar whiskey and menthol scent of him churning Will’s stomach as it invaded his lungs.

But the man Will remembered was not the one who stood before him. He looked older, the lines that framed his eyes, nose, and mouth etched even deeper, his bitterness carved into his flesh for all the world to see. The gray in his hair had gone white where it shaded his temples and he seemed smaller somehow, a monster dragged out into the light to reveal his true shape.

“Well?” Lord Reddig asked, impatient.

“Welcome to Hartford House, Lord Reddig,” Will said, and Hannibal stirred at his side, a gentle reminder that he was ready and willing to spring to his defense. “I hope you are every bit as comfortable and happy here as I ever was in your home. And please, call me Lord Clarges. I prefer only my close family use my given name.”

Statton glared, but Will only returned it with a placid, heavy-lidded stare, his chin tilted in a hint of the strength he had garnered these past six years, flanked on both sides by men who held more personal power in their pinky fingers than Statton Graham would ever hold in his life.

“I had thought you might refuse my invitation,” Grandfather said, pleased with Will’s response and not bothering to hide it. “All things considered.”

Statton flushed, his blue eyes flicking from Will’s impassive face to Hannibal’s predatory smile and back to Grandfather once again.

“It’s been over thirty years, hasn’t it?” Grandfather pressed. “I see you haven’t suffered any lack in the meantime.”

“Not anymore,” Statton said, his hand almost straying to his paunch. “Though paying Will’s dowry put me deeply in debt.”

“That is unfortunate to hear,” Hannibal said, feeling Will stiffen at his side. “I seem to recall Lady Rathmore married the summer after Will and I did. How very gallant of Lord Rathmore to take a bride without compensation, especially one such as your daughter.”

“How long will you be staying with us?” Will inquired, speaking up to prevent his father from responding to Hannibal’s jibe.

“Only the night, Lord Clarges,” Statton said, fondling his watch again as if time might move faster for the touch.

“As the son of my dearest, most intimate friend and as the father of my beloved grandchild, I had every expectation you would accept my invitation in its entirety,” Grandfather said, mouth pressed tightly with disapproval, “if you accepted it at all.”

“I have no wish to make an inconvenience of myself,” Statton sharply said, attempting to soften it with, “Your Grace.”
“Nonsense, Statton,” Grandfather said, irritation hardening his tone. “How on earth could you ever inconvenience me more now than you did in the matter of your father’s failing health? Hm? You will stay for as long as my darling grandchild enjoys your company. I insist.”

“Your Grace, I really must decline—”

“If you are no more eager to burden us with your presence than we are to be burdened by it,” Will said, his voice soft but cold, “then why have you come?”

“Honestly?” Statton asked, casting another glance around. “To see the place I should have sent your sister.”

As if on cue, Mina breezed towards them from the mingling guests, a bright-faced angel with her arms extended, singing out, “Papa! How good it is to see you! Ah! You are here at last! I have been ever so busy!”

She hurtled herself at Statton with a marksman’s aim, and Will could almost thank her for the distraction as she bore their father off. He took advantage of the clamor she made to whisper to his husband, “I wish you had not invited him.”

“Blame Grandfather,” Hannibal whispered in response.

“Hannibal!” Grandfather whispered, scowling up at them both. “You know as well as I do that we could hardly have a gathering in honor of your marriage without inviting Will’s relations!”

Family, Will noted, was not a term either his husband or Grandfather used in reference to Statton Graham, and he was deeply grateful.

“Even should he decide to stay, Will, don’t let it worry you,” Hannibal murmured, tipping his head just enough to speak the words into Will’s ear as Grandfather exchanged quiet words with Anthony. “You’ve no reason to be afraid of him, not anymore.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” Will said, the realization surprising him into a thoughtful frown. “I was never truly afraid of him, only of the power he held over me; I saw his failings and understood them.”

He turned his head just enough to hold Hannibal’s eye, adding, “I think that was why he was so brutal with me. He was embarrassed to be seen for what he truly is.”

“You never gave him what his pride imagined he was due,” Hannibal mused. “I wonder what his pride makes of seeing you now? I hope he is strangling on it.”

He followed the words with a soft kiss to Will’s temple, a final indulgence before their next guests arrived.

A trilling, lilting voice called out to them as Mr. Hawkes opened the door, the words incomprehensible to Will but making Hannibal say with delighted surprise, “Aunt Aldona?”

“The Honorable Lord and Lady Miškinis, Your Grace,” Mr. Hawkes announced, granting access to a stately couple in whom Will could see the echoes of Hannibal himself, as well as the resemblance to his mother.

“Your Grace,” Lord Miškinis said, executing a sharp, courtly bow that spoke of endless hours in the presence of royalty. “My wife and I have come in the name of Their Graces, the Duke and Duchess of Kęsgailos, who thank you for your invitation but sadly are unable to travel.”

Hannibal tipped his head down towards Will’s while Grandfather made his greetings and whispered, “My Uncle Tomas and my mother’s sister, Aldona; I didn’t expect they would come. Brace yourself, she is given to excessive affection.”

“You are very beautiful,” she crooned, and rubbed her nose to Will’s briefly before flinging herself around to rattle off another rapid sentence to her husband, who nodded and smiled at them both. “Shame on you, Hannibal! How many years since visited your grandparents? They are not young any longer!”

“I know, Aunt Aldona—”
“And they long to see your bride, Hannibal! They want those little ones to visit!” she insisted, pinching Hannibal’s cheek with force enough that he winced, immediately reduced to a recalcitrant child in her presence. She smiled at Will as she did so and purred, “Remind me to tell you of the time—”

“Thank you, Aunt Aldona, if you please,” Hannibal said, shooing her off before she could say anything incriminating, the red in his cheeks not wholly the result of her grip. “Will has many years ahead of him to hear of my misspent youth.”

“Not if you never bring him to visit,” she pointed out, wrinkling her nose in startling similarity to her nephew. She smiled at Will again and purred, “We can speak later?”

“Of course,” Will said, taken aback when he was embraced again. He stared after them half in awe as they moved to reacquaint themselves with the elder Dimmonds, taking no notice of Will’s father stuffed into the corner and glowering.

“Excessively affectionate,” Hannibal said, steadying Will with one warm hand to his lower back. “I did try to warn you.”

“You didn’t try hard enough,” Will said, surreptitiously waving the remnants of her perfume away. Pleasant as it was, it was too strong for his tastes and stung his nose. “Heavens, I should have applied myself to your mother’s native tongue! I never expected to meet your relatives from abroad.”

“I can teach you,” Hannibal said, chuckling. “I spent whole summers with them in Lietuva growing up and there were no concessions made for lack of understanding. I learned the language very quickly, indeed, starting with the food.”

“The Marquess and Marchioness of Warrington,” Mr. Hawkes announced, bringing more guests through their door.

“Goodness, it is you, Statton Graham! I had wondered who on earth was in the drive carrying on! Why in the world are you lurking in that corner? Are you frightened someone might see you?”

Aunt Margaret’s voice rose above the low noise of conversation only briefly, but Will closed his eyes and took a breath, reaching out to anchor his fingers against Hannibal’s side.

“Gods help us,” Hannibal breathed, rubbing his hand down Will’s spine and heaving a sigh of weary expectation for what was to come.

It was, Will knew, going to be an extremely long night.

And it hadn’t even properly started as yet.

The greetings were over in due time and Mr. Hawkes announced the dinner hour. Grandfather retired first and the guests were all shown to their rooms by staff to prepare themselves for their repast, leaving Hartford House to fall quiet in preparation for the evening meal.

Will was pensive and distracted as Jimmy dressed him in the clothing Nichola had suggested, his thoughts snared on his father and the unease he still inspired. He took little notice as the layers were added from his stockings up, encasing him in finery designed to celebrate the beauty unique to his gender. The colors were chosen with care, his breeches a fine, brushed fawn hemmed in layers of matching lace and tied with dark blue ribbons. The patterned pearlescence of his stockings hugged the contours of his calves, their shapeliness emphasized by the low-heeled shoes Jimmy slipped on his feet. With his white blouse, embroidered royal-blue vest, and pale green jacket fastened into place, he felt as a knight armed for war.

When Jimmy stepped back to bare him to the looking-glass, what Will saw gazing back at him was neither a man, nor a woman, but a drowsy-eyed beauty with tousled dark curls and a graceful figure showed to every advantage by the clothing Nichola had chosen for him.

He was an Omega, beautiful and fluid and in the prime of youthful bloom, and he absolutely could not wait to see the look on his father’s face when he saw him.

Jimmy selected a watch from his collection and fastened it in place, tucking it into his pocket and draping the chain with its silver and jade charms to lay just so against his vest. He turned back to the box for the sapphires, but Will stopped him.

“I’ve changed my mind about the sapphires, Jimmy,” he said, thinking that his father shouldn’t be alone in his surprise. “Certainly, my Lord,” Jimmy said, eager to assist. “The emeralds, perhaps?”

“No, Jimmy,” Will said, his eyes lighting up with glee as he moved to look through his jewelry box. “I have something else in mind entirely.”
Their guests were already in the sitting room awaiting dinner when Hannibal came down in his evening finery. Berger had
informed him of Will’s color choices for the evening, but beyond that he had no idea what his mate would arrive in and he
anticipated the sight of him. He would, Hannibal knew, look profoundly incredible in anything he wore, be it a gentleman’s
gear in support of Miss Louards, or one of the delicate gowns he had purchased on impulse. But when he set eyes on Statton
Graham moodily staring about the room, Hannibal rather hoped Will would wear one of his Omegan ensembles. If there was
ever a night to fully embrace himself for who he was, it was a night when his father was there to see it.

Lord and Lady Warrington were in pleasant conversation with Hannibal’s Aunt and Uncle, while Mina was playing a soft
tune on the harpsichord, humming to herself as she did so. Bedelia, settled with Aunt Grace and Aunt Margaret, watched Mina
with hooded eyes as her mother and aunt spoke around her. She looked, to Hannibal’s discerning eye, very much like a cat
about to pounce on an unsuspecting canary. Considering Bedelia’s eldest married son was taking singular delight in turning
the Lady Rathmore’s music sheets for her, Hannibal had a good idea why.

Anthony spied him come in and left Freddie speaking with Uncle Robert and several more Dimmonds, moving to his side
with a slight, sly smile when he saw Hannibal’s gaze wander back to Statton Graham.

“He’s something of a killjoy, isn’t he?” he said, blowing the smoke from one of his infernal cigarettes from the side of his
mouth.

“I’m rather glad of it,” Hannibal murmured, eyes narrowing on the man in question. “If he were anything less, that would
mean he might be enjoying himself, and I won’t have that.”

Anthony snorted on a laugh but was spared from answering Uncle Robert’s over-loud inquiry as to the cause when the
sitting room door was opened.

Hannibal scented his mate before he saw him and was already smiling with pleasure before he even crossed the threshold.
Will strode gracefully into the room in a swirl of sweet scent, heavy brocade, and frothy lace, every inch of his sturdy,
supple frame on display in Omegan dress. Hannibal’s dragged his gaze from his trim, shapely ankles, over the tight muscle of
his calves, and up the length of his marvelous thighs to the narrow pinch of his waist where his jacket flared in a train behind
him. The spill of his sleeves fell in layers around his corded forearms, the delicacy of the lace no match for the tender bend of
his wrists or the fineness of his long fingers. The cut of his jacket echoed the curve of his waist, fastened to the vest beneath,
which made a display of his smooth chest rising above.

And resting against his pink-tinged porcelain skin lay the shimmering ropes of a pearl necklace dripping down his chest.

“Hannibal?” Anthony said, patting him between the shoulders as if he’d choked, and he thought perhaps he had for the
sound that escaped him when he saw Hannibal’s gaze wander back to Statton Graham.

“Good heavens,” he breathed, his cheeks burning with heat, but a small, secretive smile lifting the corners of his lips. “Is
this what a swoon feels like?”

“It’s what a swoon looks like, I know that much,” Anthony whispered, his next pat hard enough to push Hannibal forward
by a step.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed, reaching to grasp Will’s hand and draw him into the center of the room, the long tail of his
flounced and bustled jacket drifting out behind him. “Gods above, you look absolutely stunning!”

“Do you approve?” Will asked, one eyebrow arching, the other threatening to be thoughtful should he dare not do so. His
free hand rose, fingers very deliberately touching the necklace to draw Hannibal’s eyes to it once more.

“If I approved any more enthusiastically,” Hannibal whispered, pulling his arm high to get a better look at his outfit, “my
appreciation would become the talk of the room.”

Will chuckled, the raspy, soft sound music to Hannibal’s ears, as beloved as the sparkle in his brilliant blue eyes.

“I am very glad you decided against the sapphires,” Hannibal murmured, his eyes lingering on Will’s throat and the
scarred mark of his teeth on display for all to see. “The brilliance of your eyes would only make them seem dim in comparison.”

“Hannibal—”

“Goodness! Will! You are an absolute vision of loveliness!” Uncle Robert boomed, interrupting Will’s soft scold. He was
flushed from his usual high spirits and turned to Will’s father in an excess of delight to say, “You must be so very proud!”
“Oh! Papa, look how beautiful Will is,” Mina said, her hands pausing on the keys. “That is a lovely shade of blue, dearest. I could never wear such a shade for fear of appearing sallow!”

“My dear, young ladies your age are always shallow,” Aunt Grace announced, lifting her monocle to peer at Will. “But, Will! What a pleasure it is to finally see you in clothing which becomes you. How very handsome you are!”

“He certainly is, Aunt Grace,” Hannibal said, amused by the annoyance that flashed across Mina’s face and was echoed in Statton Graham’s. “I am very lucky that your beauty is a match for your mind, Will.”

“Quite right!” Robert said, rushing to claim Will’s hand with such haste that Hannibal feared for his own safety. He fell back with a grin, making room for his Uncle to kiss Will’s knuckles. “Quite right, indeed! Such an exquisite jewel of a child!”

“Uncle Robert, you flatter me,” Will said, blushing, but when he caught his father’s hateful stare, he found Uncle Robert’s enthusiasm a very welcome balm to his nerves.

“Have I missed very much?” Grandfather called, straining to see within as the door was opened. He gestured directions to the footman pushing his chair and looked at the room with a beaming smile, pleased to have so many guests after so long.

“Hannibal has nearly swooned, father is an unrepentant flirt, and Lady Rathmore is shallow,” Bedelia answered, smoothing her gown. “Or so it would appear.”

“Sallow, my Lady,” Mina corrected, her laugh a touch nervous.

“I beg your pardon, Grandfather, she is sallow, as well,” Bedelia said, a satisfied smirk curving her lips when Mina squeaked with horror.

“You’ve caught us all making over Lord Clarges as if we’d never seen such a thing,” Statton said, taking a step closer, grasping his wrist behind his back so that his formidable belly preceded him.

“I beg your pardon, Lord Reddig, but we haven’t yet had the pleasure,” Grandfather said, sweeping a proud, approving look from Will’s shoes up to his curls. “This is the first time Will has indulged us in such a treat.”

“I hope you didn’t do so for my benefit,” Statton said, tilting his nose into the air as if scandalized, “Lord Clarges.”

“My dear Lord Reddig,” Aunt Margaret said, heaving to her feet with the help of her cane. “Lecters never waste their efforts on a lost cause.”

“Aunt Margaret!” Anthony said, eyes dancing with amusement.

“I dress to suit my own tastes, which pleases my husband,” Will said, watching outrage and embarrassment battle for control of his father’s face. He found himself enough his father’s son to enjoy the sight of it, nor was he the only one to do so.

“As I am serving my purpose in this household, just as you bid me, that is to your benefit, Lord Reddig. Whatever he wants, is that not what you ordered before sending me here?”

“You never made such a spectacle of yourself in my house,” Statton said, his nose wrinkling in half a sneer.

“Luckily, we are in Will’s house,” Hannibal said, relieved to have his husband’s disapproving eyebrows directed at someone else, leaving him free to admire the broad expanse of Will’s chest cradling those pearls on the barest hint of his cleavage. He slipped his arm around Will’s slender waist, tucking his mate against his side, and said, “I cannot say he is the one making a spectacle of himself.”

“I am an Omega dressed for dinner, Lord Reddig.” Will said with a small smile, standing tall and proud at Hannibal’s side.

“How else should I appear?”

“Grateful wouldn’t hurt,” Statton said, checking his pocket watch again.

“It is a bit early for that, Lord Reddig, as you have not yet left us,” Hannibal said, pleased when Grandfather only smiled, his frosty amber eyes fixed on Will’s father.

“You are the one to judge,” Mr. Hawkes announced, standing in the doorway with stiff dignity.

“Oh? What excellent timing you have, Mr. Hawkes,” Roland said, reaching for Will’s hand to pry him out of Hannibal’s grasp. “Come along, my dear. I will take you in.”

The ceiling echoed with voices raised in soft conversation as they filled the dining room, disguising the sound of Will’s voice when he said, “You really should not have invited him.”

“My dear, I had no choice,” Grandfather said, holding Will’s hand in a warm grip as a footman pushed his chair into the vast, beautifully turned-out dining room.

“He will be unpleasant,” Will predicted. “More than he already has been.”
“If he misbehaves, then we will deal with him,” Grandfather said, pulling the chair out for Will and settling him comfortably before being moved to his own place at the head of the table. “It is important for him to see that you have done well here, Will. It is important to me that he understands what a gift you are and how dearly we love you.”

Will ducked his head slightly, blushing, his nerves rising again as everyone was seated along the table at comfortable intervals. Great-Aunt Margaret was settled opposite from Roland, Bedelia was opposite Will’s father, and the Dimmonds were strung the length of the table interspersed with Grandfather’s other select guests.

Will watched his father from beneath his lashes, noting that he seated Mina with appropriate care, but his expression remained pinched, sour, and entirely surly. He was only half aware of Hannibal seating himself across from him until something nudged him beneath the table. Will looked up, bewildered and then exasperated to find Hannibal giving him a meaningful, raised eyebrow and a pointed look at his necklace.

“I believe your grandfather wanted you to behave,” he said, an unwilling smile teasing his lips.

“I don’t believe I’m misbehaving, am I, Grandfather?” Hannibal asked, all innocence.

“I have had the silver changed to guard against it,” Roland said. He spared Hannibal a repressive look before gazing down the table at his gathered friends and family. When he spoke, Will heard the rumbling, echoing undertone unique to Alphas vibrating down his spine like a physical touch.

“My dear friends and family, I am so deeply grateful that you have joined us here this evening for our private celebration of my grandson’s nuptials,” Roland said, pleased to have all eyes on him and silence throughout the room. “Circumstances have made this a late celebration, indeed, but we are all together, now, and I would like to say that Lord Reddig’s loss is our gain.”

He picked up his little glass of sherry and tipped it lightly at Will’s father.

“William Lecter, formerly William Graham, current Marquess of Clarges and future Duke of Westvale at the side of my grandson, Hannibal,” the Duke went on, measured and formal, “is a treasure of the likes I have never had the pleasure to see before, and doubt I will ever see again. So join me now in toasting to the happy union of these two dear children and to the continuity of the Lecter line. Amor est vitae essentia.”

The toast opened the way for the soup starters and everyone settled in, chatting with their neighbors and making pleasant, light conversation. Will brought his spoon to his lips, but the scent of the soup churned his stomach and he only feigned to sip it, nervously avoiding Hannibal’s inquiring look.

“Well, everyone seems to be having a wonderful time,” Hannibal said, finding he had no appetite for the soup, either. He slid a little decorative bowl of sugar-glazed nuts towards Will, smiling when his mate plucked a few up to suck on, savoring their sweetness.

“So far,” Grandfather said, his tone guarded.

The mix of family and friends was a good one, their placement designed to keep war from breaking out. Will played his part as hostess with ease despite his usual reticence, fully aware of his father’s displeasure. He seemed bewildered by Will’s position in the household and openly shocked to be referred to Will over and again in answer to his questions regarding the affairs of Hartford Town and the estate itself. He remained silently disapproving to hear his son addressed as a beloved member of the family, and it emboldened Will to put forth his best effort, even though he knew he was playing with fire.

“Did you have a very tiring journey from the Capital, Lord Warrington?” Will asked, using conversation to avoid taking anything more than nibbles of the food.

“Not in the least! The rail into Chesterton cuts the travel time by better than half,” Lord Warrington said. “It’s such a pleasure to have quick access to the countryside, isn’t it?”

“Soon, the trip shall be even shorter,” Uncle Robert said, dividing his attention between his plate and Lord Warrington. “According to our Anthony.”

“Indeed, Uncle Robert,” Hannibal said, smiling. “For once Anthony’s drivel bears the fruit of truth. Hartford shall soon have a station of its own. Our little town is the next stop on their path.”

“Oh! How delightful, papa,” Mina said. “Now you shall have no excuses for sequestering yourself out in the country!”

“No, I shall not,” Statton said, less than pleased with the suggestion. “What an enterprising broker you must have for Hartford, Your Grace. I imagine it was no small feat to work that deal.”
“It took a good deal of time and no small amount of persuasion,” Will said, shaking his head in slight refusal of a second portion of their new course, “especially to get the lifetime contract for goods, but I consider the effort nominal for the gain. I can advise you, if you wish to follow our example.”

Statton chuckled and said, “That is amusing, coming from you.”

“Amusing?” Hannibal echoed, cocking his head with a dangerous gleam in his amber eyes.

“Lord Reddig, watching Will sling a trout at Hannibal’s face was amusing,” Anthony laughed, “but watching him get the better of those rail representatives was absolutely terrifying!”

“Lord du Maurier, surely you jest?” Statton asked, flummoxed. “I merely meant that it amused me to hear Lord Clarges speak as if he had a personal hand in things when clearly it was His Grace or Lord Clarges who did so!”

“My son jokes about a great many things, Lord Reddig,” Uncle Robert said, jowls aquiver, “but never about business.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal said, irritated to have Will’s authority questioned. “Will is the one who brokered the deal. I had no knowledge of it and Grandfather was involved only in signing off on the purchase of properties. The station was Will’s project, from inception to fruition.”

Hannibal watched it sink in, enjoying every moment of Statton’s pained disbelief.

“You’re very brave, Your Grace,” Statton finally said, attempting to rally, “letting an Omega muck about in your business dealings.”

“Is that what you called it when I brought Broadriver out of the negative?” Will inquired, pleased by the flush that rose on Statton’s cheeks. “You never complained of the work I did for you.”

“If Will hadn’t taken action, we would’ve been fleeced blind,” Grandfather said, not nearly as well as he made himself out to be, but determined to have his say. “He uncovered numerous errors in our books and discovered our land agent was stealing from us.”

“Heavens! There was such a hubbub when he went to prison!” Aunt Margaret said.

“Oh, yes, I hope Will makes a habit of sending to prison any person who threatens the safety of this house,” Hannibal said, lifting his wine in a small toast, his assessing golden eyes on Statton Graham. “After he’s coked them silly, of course.”

“I just find it very hard to believe what I am hearing this evening!” Statton said, ignoring the looks he garnered from everyone at the table. “Having raised Will and done the very best I could with his education, I admit I find your claims very hard to digest.”

“Goodness, Lord Reddig, you sound as if you would fit right in among those dreadful Council members!” Uncle Robert remarked, only to be elbowed hard by Bedelia, much to his confusion.

“I am a member, as a matter of fact,” Statton said, craning a look around as if looking for supporters, but finding only a small silence as the dishes were cleared and the next course was laid. Any hope Will had that Statton would let the matter drop was dashed when his father said, “The Council for the Betterment of Omegas is making great changes, and will continue to do so, if I have any say in things.”

“How on earth can you propose supporting such an effort when your own child is Omegan?” Miss Lounds inquired, her pretty face taut with anger.

“It puts me in the particular position of having intimate knowledge of the people in question,” Statton said, secure in his beliefs, much to their guests’ consternation. “Which makes me singularly qualified to decide what is in their best interests.”

“Would you truly wish to burden your conscience with the knowledge that you’ve deprived your own child of their rights?” Lord Warrington asked, horrified.

“Great advancements require great sacrifices,” Statton said, solemn as if he’d uttered a pearl of wisdom they could not afford to ignore.

“That is a very easy thing to say when you are not the one required to make them,” Aunt Margaret said, dropping a look of thinly-veiled distaste at Lord Reddig.

“It is for the best, hurt feelings aside,” Lord Reddig said, his appetite renewed by the topic of conversation. “A great many Council members have Omegas in their families. It isn’t as if one can choose one’s relatives, though I am sure it is something we have all wished for.”
“Never more than in this moment, father,” Hannibal said, abandoning his food for his wine, doing his best to prevent his bond from feeding Will too much of the simmering anger he felt.

Will sat still as stone in his seat as if he had not even heard his father speak, but his hand trembled when he lifted his glass and he immediately put it back down, his lips pressed into a tight, unhappy line. Their placement at the table prevented Hannibal from comforting his mate, but he could feel Will’s coiled tension like a spring against his skin and he bristled in response, needing to defend him against his discomfort.

“Children,” Roland said, tapping his knife against his glass. “Remember yourselves.”

“I remember a great deal, brother, but I am beside myself that I did not recognize Lord Reddig as we arrived,” Aunt Margaret said, looking appropriately woeful. “That was not well done of me, considering he looked precisely as he did the last time I saw him.”

“Oh? And how was that, my Lady?” Mina asked, eager to keep the conversation light against all expectation.

“Ah! Let me see, he was stamping his foot in a dither about something or other, quite beside himself, if I recall correctly,” Margaret said, chuckling at the memory. She angled a smirk at Statton and added, “Your face was as red those roses!”

“Father! You threw tantrums as a child?” Mina asked, delighted.

“He had just turned thirty, my dear,” Margaret corrected. “But they do say men mature later than women, do they not?”

Statton’s mouth tightened with irritation and he said, “Better late than never at all, my Lady.”

“You would know, Lord Reddig,” Aunt Margaret said, chuckling. “Do be sure to tell me the difference should you ever find out.”

“Well,” Statton said, partaking of his wine yet again. He had, in fact, imbibed heavily of every alcohol offered at the table, and Will saw with irritation that his nose was rather red. But there was no stopping a landslide once it started, and all he could do was sit in shocked silence when his father said, “I see Will has landed in a household where the manners match his own!”

“We haven’t any banners to speak of,” Grace lamented, sighing wistfully.

“I do not believe you are in any position to be passing judgment on our family,” Hannibal mildly said, raising his voice just a little over the conversation at the dinner table. “Considering how you see fit to treat your own, your son in particular.”

Roland put his silverware down and watched with his fingers steepled beneath his chin, his frown taut and severe.

“Just what’s that supposed to mean?” Statton asked, flushing. “Hm?

“That is a rude little man,” Lady Miškinis said to no one in particular, though only Hannibal and her husband understood her.

Lord Miškinis broke his solemn silence to say, “Had anyone spoken at our table in such a way, I would have taken their head, Hannibal.”

“Alas, that would not endear me to my mate, whatever the provocation,” Hannibal said, garnering a sideways glance from Will and a suspicious stare from Statton Graham.

“Lord Reddig, you are here to celebrate the successful marriage of your child into the Lecter line,” Roland said, woodenly returning to his meal. “I realize I am asking you for the impossible, but do try to be pleasant.”

“You say that, Your Grace, but here we are six years later and all my family has gotten from this successful marriage is fodder for the gossips!” Statton said, gesturing impatiently at his wine glass so that a footman scrambled to fill it. “Your precious grandson made Will a laughingstock!”

“As you are attempting to do?” Lady Warrington asked, irritated with his performance.

Hannibal plastered a calm smile on and said, “I understand that you are concerned for the treatment Will has received since his arrival—”

“I have very little interest in how you treat him except for the gossip it engenders,” Statton said, and Hannibal saw Will tense across from him, a flare of temper flashing across his impassive face. “I am more concerned that his sister is unhappy and would have been much better served being a Duchess-in-waiting than Lady Rathmore.”

“Father!” Mina gasped, the only sound in an otherwise stunned silence.

“I could take his head for you,” Lord Miškinis offered, and his wife gave him a reproving look across the table.

“No, thank you, Uncle,” Hannibal said. “I appreciate the offer, however.”
“Mina made her choice,” Will said, his even voice carrying through the room, “as you made yours. There is very little sense in dwelling on what has already passed. As I am painfully aware, it solves nothing. May we please carry on with our celebration?”

Statton glared at him, his blue eyes unwavering and so forceful that Hannibal stirred a little, wishing to shield Will from his father.

“I half expected you would be dead, from what your sister wrote me.”

“Father!” Mina cried again, mortified, and Will flinched, his stubborn chin lifting a fraction as every pair of eyes fastened on Statton Graham.

Hannibal cast a curious glance over at Will, the rest of the family following the direction of his gaze, including those perfectly able to understand the language they preferred not to use.

“Will?” he asked, curious.

“After my accident, I wrote to Mina,” Will admitted. “I confided my fears in her. I never imagined she would speak of those fears to anyone else.”

“I was petrified for you, Will!” Mina stammered, her hand trembling so hard she sloshed wine over glass and had to set it down. “The things you have told me!”


“Apparently, someone stole into this house and shoved my son down the stairs!” Statton said, his smirk unpleasant. His voice rose to fill the dining room, ensuring he was heard by all present. “I assumed Lord Clarges had finally decided to wash his hands of him!”

“As you can see, I wish to do no such thing,” Hannibal said, interrupting him before he could say anything more hurtful to Will than he already had. “It was an accident, Lord Reddig, that is all.”

“Stairs?” Aunt Grace asked, the word echoing down the length of the table like a doomsday bell.

“It is astonishing how your hearing improves when you so desire, Aunt Grace,” Hannibal sighed.

“Why is this the first we are hearing of it?!” Uncle Robert demanded, exchanging a shocked look with his son.

“Will, what on earth?” Anthony asked, everyone beginning to speak at once.

“I was also informed of a girth strap that was cut!” Statton said, his smile malicious as he gazed at Will, who looked back at him with bland indifference and sipped his wine, refusing to be ruffled. “The fall he took could have broken his neck!”

“This is outrageous!”

“Hannibal, what on earth is that man saying? He is speaking too fast—”

“Everyone, please!” Grandfather said, the Alpha boom in his voice deep enough to silence even those who professed not to hear well. He managed a long stare that quieted the table at once. “I will not have our guests believe us quarrelsome folk!”

“Nonsense, Grandfather,” Bedelia said, her slight, cat-like smile firmly in place. “We are all intimate acquaintances, are we not?”

Roland warily said, “Indeed.”

“Then there is no reason to govern ourselves as if we are among strangers,” Bedelia added, transferring her cold stare to Will’s father, “is there?”

“Young lady,” Statton said, bristling up like a bulldog. “I would doubt very much you would know how to govern yourself in the first place!”

“Lord Reddig!” Will sharply said, reproaching his father’s rude speech. “No well-bred gentleman would ever speak to a Lady in such a way!”

“Well, then I suppose that calls into question your breeding, does it not?” Statton asked, shocking the table all over again. “Honestly! As if this family could hope to lecture me on proper behavior! Ha! Since Will has come to this house he has been cast off, embarrassed, shamed before the entirety of Society, deeply abused by his husband, and pushed down a flight of stairs!”

“Indeed he has,” Hannibal said, his words clipped with tight anger. “Such an improvement, really, from how he was treated in your house, Lord Reddig. He is grateful on a daily basis, to be sure.”

Statton’s head whipped around, his blue eyes fastening on Hannibal with something akin to hatred in their depths.
“Do not play the outraged father for us, if you please,” Hannibal said, glaring right back at him. “You are unconvincing at best and embarrassing at worst.”

Everyone seated at the table stared at Statton Graham with varying degrees of disbelief and open dislike, silent and disapproving of his behavior to such an extent that he finally realized he was the object of their censure, not his son. When the low criticism began, Statton turned a most interesting shade of deep red that nearly bordered on purple.

Hannibal was fiendishly pleased to see it.

“I refuse to be spoken to in this way!” Statton said, and surged to his feet, the silverware rattling on the table. "How dare you all judge me as if I am the one who is at fault!"

“From what anyone here can see, sir,” Uncle Robert said, verbalizing their affront. "You are." Statton opened his mouth to refute it but was prevented by Will's sharp voice ordering, "Sit down, Lord Reddig."

The words cracked like a whip, bringing another sudden hush to the table. Will drew a deep breath, his restless fingers turning his glass around and around. He gazed at his father with steady disapproval and informed him, "You are our guest, invited if not welcomed. Dessert is here and we should all enjoy it. If you do not like what you have been served, Lord Reddig, then I can only assume you prefer to do the serving. Please do not complain when it is portioned back to your plate."

"How dare you!"

"How dare you?" Will echoed, his eyebrows slamming down over his narrowed eyes. "How dare you? Speaking on events of which you have no knowledge as if you have ever spared a moment's concern for my well-being! Now sit down, Lord Reddig. You have had your say, and now you will reap the reward for your appalling behavior. Sit."

Hannibal tensed when Statton's hand rose clenched into a fist, an involuntary movement as he stared at his son. Will stared back at him and took a slow sip of his wine, his blue eyes fastened on his father, unimpressed with his bluster.

"It will be the last thing you ever do," Hannibal softly promised, his words a low purr in the stunned silence.

"Statton," Grandfather warned, entering the fray again despite his determination they should sort it for themselves.

"Father," Mina said, raising her gloved hand to Statton's arm. "Please, sit. You're making a scene!"

With his righteous exit denied him, there was no choice but to sit and bear the condemnation of those whose dinner he had disrupted so rudely. Florid with impotent rage and embarrassment, Statton allowed himself to be coaxed to sit, twitching with every glance and whisper.

The staff leapt into action, moving to serve the dessert course, professionals to the bitter end, and their dinner settled once more into routine calm.

"Well," Hannibal said, managing to catch his husband's hard blue eyes. He smiled his encouragement as their dessert was placed before them, noting that Will yet again took no more than the smallest of bites from his dessert. "That was entertaining."

"I'm afraid this night hasn't gone as we could wish," Will said, sipping the dessert wine to chase the sweetness of the cake from his mouth. His blue eyes flicked to Grandfather, who looked worn and drained, and he said, "I apologize, Grandfather, for his behavior as well as my own."

"There is nothing in your own behavior you should apologize for, Will," Grandfather said, glowering at Statton, who sat like a dark stain at the table, resisting his daughter's attempts to lighten his mood, "and nothing surprising in regards to your father's. He has always been an unpleasant boy. He takes after his mother, who was as sour as a lemon and had the disposition of a billy goat."

"Having expected disaster, I admit I am pleasantly surprised," Hannibal said, coaxing a small, tired smile from his husband. "We are none of us dead and no one imprisoned. I should say that is a success."

"It is in this house," Grandfather said, and reached over to pat Will's hand, saying, "Perhaps you could take the ladies to the drawing room?"

"Yes, Grandfather," Will said, and a footman appeared in an instant to draw his chair back as he stood. He cast a smile down the table and said, "Ladies, shall we retire to the drawing room for coffee? Gentlemen, the brandy will be served here for you all."

He felt his father's glare like daggers in his back as he led the ladies from the room, and he silently dreaded the next few days that Statton was expected to stay.
“Father is livid,” Mina whispered, walking at his side as the ladies trailed behind in murmured conversation. “I was so worried when I saw he was to come. I cannot imagine he should stay here, Will. Surely one of you will not survive it!”

“I find that a reasonable outcome, Mina,” Will said, nodding to the footman who opened the drawing room door, “provided I am the one who survives.”

The gentlemen joined them in the drawing room some time later, finding a pleasant atmosphere of smiles and laughter far removed from the tension of the dining room.

But neither Hannibal nor Statton was among them, much to Will’s surprise.

He excused himself and moved immediately to Grandfather’s side, whispering, “Where is Hannibal?”

“He invited Lord Reddig on a tour of Hartford House, my dear,” Grandfather murmured, giving a reassuring smile to their other guests, “shortly after you left us.”

“Oh, dear,” Will breathed, casting a nervous glance towards the door as the gentlemen settled in among them. “Do you think he’s thrown Lord Reddig from the parapets?”

“Oh, I do hope so,” Grandfather said, patting his hand.

Will took advantage of the momentary disruption their arrival caused and handed his cup off to a passing footman before he slipped out of the drawing room. The panel muted the sounds within as it closed behind him, leaving him alone with his anxiety over what his father might say, what Hannibal might yet do. Worry hastened his step as he moved through the dark hallways, looking for any sign of them. He found the library door cracked open, spilling light out into the dim hallway in a runner of gold bisecting the polished floor. Will stopped before it, hearing the unmistakable sound of his father’s voice.

Apprehension kept him from passing the threshold, an unmarked shadow to the two men inside.

“Would you care to tell me now why you’ve walked me all over this house instead of taking brandy like a gentleman?” Statton asked, the words clipped and sharp enough that Will held his breath. He pressed against the door panel, peering in to see his husband’s broad back and his father’s round, angry face just beyond.

“You needed to work off your temper and I wanted to show you the changes Will has brought to Hartford,” Hannibal said, pouring the man a brandy and pushing it towards him over the massive desk. “I thought it might interest you to see the profound positive effect he’s worked here since his arrival.”

Statton took the glass up, affronted, but it did not prevent him from drinking it.

“Why should you care what I see of him?” Statton asked. “Or what I think of him?”

“I couldn’t give two figs for your opinion of him, that much is true,” Hannibal admitted, sipping his brandy. “In the grand scheme of things, you don’t matter in the least and I won’t concern myself with you, but it is very important to me that deep down in that black heart of yours, you understand how badly you’ve misjudged him and comprehend the terrible mistakes you’ve made where he is concerned.”

Statton guffawed, a sneer wrinkling his nose as he said, “You’re a besotted fool, Lord Clarges. Your clarity of thought and ability to reason were lost the moment you let him seduce you.”

“It pains me to realize how like you I was,” Hannibal said, repressing a shudder that Will could read in the set of his shoulders. “But we are the fools, Lord Reddig, though I am less so now. Very luckily for me, Will wouldn’t stand for such nonsense.”

He sipped his own brandy, gathering his thoughts before he said, “Will came here as a child, terrified and alone, and without any help or support from anyone at all, he took this entire estate in hand and dragged it from the brink ruin. That isn’t something just anyone can do, Lord Reddig. Surely, even you can admit how clever he is?”

“If you wish praise for his virtues, you are speaking to the wrong man,” Statton said, his voice raised in an unhappy hiss that made Will’s skin tighten with dread even still. “And for all of your snide remarks, you seemed eager enough to meet me. Why was that, Lord Clarges? Change of heart regarding the Council?”

“Certainly not. It is simple enough, Lord Reddig—I wanted to see the man who had done such terrible harm to my husband,” Hannibal said, his voice low and dangerous. “I wanted to look into your face and know that something truly evil walks the earth.”
“I have only ever treated Will with the strict correction that his nature required!” Statton said, putting his glass down with a loud clink that nearly shattered it.

“No, you treated him as if he was something inhuman,” Hannibal said, lowering his drink. “You treated him with a savagery you wouldn’t show a beast. You bent his mind to your design and did everything in your power to see him broken beyond repair.”

Hannibal ran his finger around the rim of his glass, an absent gesture that still managed to be somewhat menacing.

“Yet all of your attempts to diminish him have only made Will shine all the brighter,” Hannibal said, a slight smile on his lips, a softness suffusing him at the mention of his mate. “Everything that life has heaped upon his head, every horror you or I have devised to ruin him, Will has handled with a grace and dignity I doubt either one of us could ever manage.”

Will saw Hannibal delve into his pocket and draw forth something that made his father’s eyes widen.

“What on earth is this?” Statton asked, nostrils flaring, his eyes narrowing to suspicious slits.

“This,” Hannibal said, holding out a cheque so that Statton could see the sum, “is the dowry Will arrived with, plus interest for the years of our marriage.”

“I don’t understand,” Statton blustered, a flush darkening his round cheeks. “Are you attempting to return him?”

“I would sooner die,” Hannibal said, calm and firm. “Will’s dowry, in his own words, was to compensate for the burden of his care. I would no more accuse him of being a burden than I would accuse you of being a father to him, and so I return it in full.”

Statton stared at him, equal parts offended and greedy.

“From the moment Will arrived here, he has managed Hartford House and all of its business dealings,” Hannibal said, holding the cheque out with his fingertips as if the idea of touching Statton even in passing was abhorrent. His bond seethed with deep outrage and anger, but none of it showed on his calm, smooth face. He appeared entirely unaffected, which made him all the more dangerous. “He has brought this estate into a wealth of the likes our family hasn’t seen in generations, and he’s done so in less than ten years.”

“So you wish to keep him because he makes you money?” Statton sneered, plucking the cheque up and folding it to slide it carefully into his pocket.

“No,” Hannibal said, cocking his head. “It was simply an explanation I thought you would understand, as I doubt an emotional attachment would make sense to you, monster that you are. The truth is, Will is a treasure without equal, Lord Reddig. Had he come with nothing but the clothes on his back, I would still have gained a fortune in him. The man I married, the boy you sent me, the child you abused so harshly that I struggle daily not to call you out for it, he is infinitely more precious to me than the sum of the world’s wealth. I am grateful with every breath that you are a loathsome, self-serving pig of a man who schemed to deliver Will into my hands rather than his sister, for what purpose I still have my doubts.”

Statton trembled with suppressed rage, incensed that the child he’d sent with every intention of failing had, instead, won a place of such high regard with a man who would one day hold great power in their country.

“Will is wondrous and precious and perfect, the sun and the moon of my world,” Hannibal purred. “Should he ever ask it of me, I would find a way to have you stripped of your title and holdings and turned out into the street like the pathetic excuse of a man you are. Remember that when you speak of him and of what he means to you, Lord Reddig, and be grateful that my husband holds such sway over me that he keeps me from a retaliation which would satisfy me to no end.”

Statton’s mouth worked with impotent rage, his cheeks florid.

“Do you honestly believe that I will stand here and be insulted?” he asked, drawing up with offended dignity. “How dare you speak to me as if that creature’s failings were on my head! You can tell that wretched child he is no longer a part of my family for good and all!”

“You’re right, he isn’t,” Hannibal said, and Will pressed his hand to his heart, swallowing hard against the tears that tightened his throat when the bond surged with fury and wrenching love in equal measures. “He is a Lecter, Lord Reddig. He is our family now, and we are his, and we are a jealous, vicious people when it comes to protecting those we love. Because make no mistake,” he took a step closer to Statton, who stepped backwards before he could stop himself, his blue eyes widening in shock to see Hannibal transformed with cold rage, “I love Will with everything in me, and there is nothing I would not do for him. Nothing.”
“How dare you threaten me,” Statton said, his voice a harsh, breathless whisper.

“It was not a threat, Lord Reddig, but a promise,” Hannibal corrected, tipping his head back to look down his noble nose at Will’s father. “If you come into his presence, you will do so with a smile. If he asks you a question, you will answer him politely. If your opinion is sought, you will not offend him with your ignorance. You will at all times be pleasant and agreeable where he is concerned, because if you choose not to do so, I will take the things that you consider more important than your son—I will buy your debts one by one, I will close your lines of credit with every merchant you do business with, and I will sink you like a ship at sea because it is in my power to do so and I value his happiness far more than I value your life.”

Will caught his breath, the force of Hannibal’s love for him and fury on his behalf calling to the deepest instincts he held, an Omega’s response to their Alpha’s display, a husband’s pride in his spouse’s strength.

“For the remainder of your life, you will treat Will with the effusive, polite respect you would show to a stranger, Lord Reddig, because that is what he is to you, and in this we can agree,” Hannibal said, the words rumbling so deep in Will’s chest that he felt them all the way through his very bones. “He is not your son; he is my husband and we are a family. His home is with me, as mine is with him, and I will always protect him, not because he needs it, but because he is irreplaceable to me.”

Statton smirked, an ugly and cruel little smile, and said, “We’ll see.”

He moved towards the door and Will backed away, slipping into the shadows with his hand still pressed to his pounding heart as if he could touch the bond itself. He took one dragging breath and then another, the solid thump of his father’s footsteps fading as he mounted the stairs, snarling at the footman who offered to guide the way.

He heard the quiet clink of the decanter again and quickly made his way back to the drawing room, where only his sister had remarked his disappearance.

“You’re quite flushed, Will,” she whispered, reaching up to smooth his curls. “I thought at first father had upset you again, but you seem... happy.”

“Do I?” he asked, breathless and shaken, trying his best to pay attention to her.

But he couldn’t focus on anything. His hand moved over and over to press to his heart, fingers sliding over the little pearls, his palm catching the reverberation of Hannibal’s sincerity and deep respect as he made his position clear to Will’s father.

‘He is a Lecter, Lord Reddig. He is ours now, and we are his, and we are a jealous, vicious people when it comes to protecting those we love...’

Hannibal could have found no better way to wound his father had he a thousand years to consider it, Will knew. Statton had sent him here to live in misery for the rest of his days, tied to an Alpha who despised him, reviled for who was. He had arrived hoping to see Will belittled in his own household, made a mockery of, spoken down to and largely ignored, and instead he found the child he despised to be admired, treated with dignity and respect, his opinions sought and his advice valued.

And just when he might have been imagining a way to use Will’s status to his advantage, Hannibal had tossed the dowry back to him with disdain for its meaning and made it clear that Statton would find no welcome, his sins neither forgotten nor forgiven. Hannibal had fought in his place, attempting to spare him the battle entirely, and the love he’d spoken of with such passion still made Will dizzy with its strength.

It carried him through the chatter, through everyone retiring for the night against the late hour. He virtually floated up to his suite, so absent-minded that Jimmy teased him in that gentle way he had, saying, “Your evening surely took a turn for the better, my Lord, judging by that smile.”

“It did,” Will agreed, retreating to his dressing room to undress. He spied his nightclothes laid out on the bed, the simple shirt and pants he usually wore for the sake of warmth. “Has Hannibal come up?”

Jimmy nodded, intent on Will’s buttons, “He has, my Lord. Mr. Berger said he was in a mood, so he fetched some brandy for him. He isn’t abed as yet.”

Will bit his lower lip in thought, reaching for the nightshirt and rubbing the fine material between his fingers.

‘I will always protect him, not because he needs it, but because he is irreplaceable to me...’

“Is something the matter, my Lord?” Jimmy asked.

“No, only... I should like to visit my husband tonight,” Will said, his cheeks pinking up but his tone firm.

Jimmy blinked, a small smile playing around his lips. “I think I know just the thing.”
It took Hannibal a long time to calm himself from his encounter with Statton Graham. He trembled with rage every time he thought of that insufferable monster being anywhere near Will, but steeled himself to bear it for now. Will would have his say before it was over, Hannibal was determined on that count, he only hoped he was there to witness his mate’s righteous fury come down on Statton’s head like a hammer.

He would catch hell from Grandfather come morning, he knew, for not joining their guests in the sitting room after dinner, but he shunted that concern aside to wait for morning. He was in no state for any company but that of his mate, and he had no wish to burden Will with his bristling, not with the bond making things that much more keenly felt.

He settled in his armchair before the fire with a sigh, staring into the flames with weary consideration. Speaking to Statton of dowries and seeing the man who had sent Will to him with such ill intent brought Hannibal to unhappy reflection of his own behavior. He was so deeply lost in thoughts of the past that he was taken by surprise when a soft knock came on the washroom door.

He straightened in his seat, heart pounding, and called out, “Enter.”

The door opened, an eddy of Will’s sweet, lush scent teasing his nose. Hannibal swallowed reflexively, transported to that night nearly seven years ago when Will had come to him, bared down to his soul and trembling with fear, only to be torn into like a hapless fawn.

The Omega coming towards him was no child sent to woo him, not anymore. He emerged from the shadows like a fantasy made of moonlight, pale and beautiful, the hem of his silken wrapper swirling around his trim ankles.

Hannibal caught his gaze and held it, his heart pounding even harder when he saw the determination reflected in Will’s beautiful, expressive eyes.

“Will,” he breathed, the only prayer he needed, the only wish he could ever ask to be fulfilled.

“Say it for me, Hannibal,” Will whispered, slowing as he neared but not stopping, graceful and breathtaking in his strength. “Please...”

Hannibal wet his lips, his amber eyes glittering with growing hope. There was no hesitation in him when he answered, “I love you, Will. Always and forever, I love you.”

Will stopped there just before him, near enough that Hannibal could see the line of his body through the nearly-sheer material, solid and supple and firm. There was no trace of the boy he’d been anywhere to be seen, but he was still in there, hidden in the deepest parts of Will’s heart, still stinging with the pain Hannibal had inflicted on him.

Hannibal angled his head up as Will reached out to cup his face, the warmth of his palm settling against his cheek with tender care. There was no doubt in his mind that the moment had come, the decision he had longed for and dreaded and hoped for with such passion that it frightened him to finally realize it was here.

“Ask me, Hannibal,” Will whispered, standing between Hannibal’s spread legs and gazing down at him with an intensity that shook Hannibal to his very soul. “Ask me.”

Hannibal held his gaze unblinking, his heart bared to his mate in every syllable when he asked, “Will you have me, Will? Always and forever?”

Will smiled, the glittering in his eyes spilling over, his answer a tremulous whisper.

“Yes.”

Chapter 47

“Yes.”

It was a wonder that a single word could alter the course of a man’s life, but Hannibal sat still in his chair, staring up at the most wondrous person he could ever imagine, and felt that word resonate through his heart with a vibrancy that threatened to steal his breath away.

It nearly stole Will’s as well, the bond setting him adrift in his husband’s profound joy. Hannibal’s pleasure and relief and trembling hope fed into him in a chaos of emotions, but all of it was wrapped in the glorious bliss of his love.
“Are you certain?” Hannibal asked, because it was too good to be true, too much what he desired, too tremulous a hope to trust when he knew too well that he didn’t deserve him, that he could never deserve him. Tears rose in his amber eyes, the turmoil of his feelings welling up to spill down his cheeks. “Is this a dream I’m doomed to wake from?”

“I’m certain, Hannibal,” Will murmured, smoothing his tears away. “I’ve made my decision. My place is with you and our home is one another. The family that loves and respects me is ours together.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, smiling from the bloom of love within him. “Should you ever change your mind—”

“I won’t. I am greedy for you, Hannibal Lecter,” Will said, bending to nuzzle his nose to Hannibal’s. “I will always choose you.”

“I can hardly believe it,” Hannibal said, a soft, delighted laugh escaping him. Will sank down to sit in his lap and Hannibal wrapped both arms around him, eyes sweeping closed as he hugged his mate tight. “Oh, gods, please don’t let me wake, if this truly is a dream.”

“I’ve kept you waiting for so long,” Will whispered, grasping Hannibal’s jaw with both hands. He curled against him, resting his forehead to his husband’s and pulling his earthy scent deep into his lungs, savoring the fact that he could do such a thing. After all of this time he could reach out and find someone reaching back, always reaching back for him.

“Certainly not longer than I kept you waiting,” Hannibal said, trembling and almost hesitant as he raised his hand to Will’s face in return. His long fingers spread, sliding with delicacy to smooth Will’s curls behind his ear, settling his palm against Will’s cheek. “Have you any idea how happy you’ve made me?”

“I do,” Will said, smoothing his hands down Hannibal’s shoulders and turning to kiss his husband’s salty palm. He rubbed his sharp little fangs over the meat of Hannibal’s hand in a gentle nip, watching him from beneath the heavy fringe of his long lashes. “I can feel how happy I’ve made you, well enough to tell you it’s not nearly as happy as you’ve made me in return, Hannibal.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, slipping his hand down Will’s long throat and over the graceful length of his body to rest on his long thigh, fingers spreading over tight muscle. “I’ve been waiting for this moment so anxiously, nervous that something might sway you to turn away from me.”

“You don’t have to be anxious anymore. I am yours,” Will told him, echoing the words Hannibal had spoken to him that night at Chelsea House, the night he’d learned of the bond and first confessed his love. He leaned into Hannibal, offering the comfort of his scent and the warmth of his touch, whispering with perfect recollection, “I swear by all the gods, Hannibal, I am yours and yours alone; if not forever, then for as long as you will have me...”

“It frightens me sometimes, you know,” Hannibal breathed, more tears slipping unheeded down his cheek, gazing into Will’s eyes so intently it almost made him blush, “how much I love you. I never thought I would ever have such a gift, Will, but you gave it to me against all expectation.”

“Don’t let it frighten you,” Will whispered, kissing Hannibal’s tears away, the warm weight of his body a reminder to his husband that he was here, that the decision had been made in his favor. “You are my husband, and I will protect you, Hannibal.”

“Not from yourself,” Hannibal said, nuzzling Will as he brushed those coaxing kisses over his face. “Not from your knees, not from your wit, and certainly not from my love for you. Let it frighten me, Will. Let it remind me every moment how lucky I am that you gave me a second chance I never deserved.”

Will drew back only a little, lashes mingling as they breathed one another in, basking in their closeness, warm with shared affection.

“I promised to dedicate myself to your happiness,” Hannibal said, his voice husky with tears. “I will spend the rest of my life ensuring that you never regret this decision, Will.”

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, thumb gently wiping another stray tear that rolled down his face. “You do know that you make me happy, don’t you?”

“I try to make you happy, Will,” Hannibal said, baring the tips of his heavy fangs in a slight smile. There was a vulnerability in him that touched Will to his depths when he confessed, “I hope to.”

“You do,” Will told him, shifting higher in his lap, trying to get closer to him within the confines of the fireside chair. “You make me happy, Hannibal. Not the gifts, not the beautiful clothing, not the riches you’re so intent on giving me, but you.”
He slid his hand beneath Hannibal’s jaw and urged his husband’s head up, needing to have his say.

“All my life I have been alone,” he murmured, caressing Hannibal’s face. “All my life I’ve been told that I’m... an offense to common decency, too much of one and not enough of the other in either direction to ever suit anyone in this world. I thought I would always be alone, burdened with a Gift I never asked for, an object of pity and ridicule and revilement... but then you saw me, Hannibal.”

Hannibal tipped his head, pressing his forehead to Will’s, drawing every soft breath into his own lungs because he could never be close enough, never be as much a part of his mate as he longed to be.

“You see me as I am,” Will said, a trace of wonder tingeing his words even still. “Everything that my father despises, you exalt. The things that have always separated me from others, you delight in and admire. You see me, and you love me, and you never leave me in a moment’s doubt of your affections, Hannibal. Being with you, knowing you, seeing you, that is what makes me happy. You brought our teacup together again, Hannibal. Our shattered potential has been healed, just as you promised.”

“Will,” Hannibal whispered, tipping his head to kiss him, a thrill running through him when Will’s fingers clenched on him, a clutch for balance in the midst of heady emotion, a touch seeking the solid reassurance he would always give, always and forever.

“I have lived in fear for so long that anything which brought me happiness would be stripped from me, that I hadn’t any right to such a thing,” Will said, his words muffled in Hannibal’s mouth as they kissed, “but you’ve loved me despite my reservations, fearlessly and fervently. When I’m with you, I never fear the consequences and I know that I would gladly fight even Fate Herself to stay by your side, because I know you’re fighting just as fiercely to stay by mine.”

Hannibal’s arm slid up against his back, drawing Will in tight, his other hand moving swiftly to cup the back of Will’s head, fingers buried in his curls as he embraced him.

“Always and forever could never be long enough,” Will whispered, closing his eyes as Hannibal held him. “But we’ll do our best to be content with it.”

They parted only far enough for another kiss, molten with hunger and need, each prickle of sharp teeth and each tease of soft tongues a testament to their shared relief. The decision was made, Will had chosen him, and the joy of it was nearly too much for Hannibal to bear.

“I love you, Will,” he said, the words half a moan into Will’s parted mouth, his thoughts derailed by the nip of Will’s teeth. “More than anything in the world, I love you.”

The chair creaked a warning loudly enough that Will eased back, flushed and disheveled from Hannibal’s stroking hands and frantic kisses, his curls spilling down his neck to whisper against Hannibal’s hand where it gripped his shoulder.

He cocked his head, stroking both hands through Hannibal’s hair, and told him, “I missed you terribly while you were gone. Did I tell you that?”

Hannibal’s fine lips parted in a slow smile, his amber eyes crinkling. “I hoped you would.”

“You’ll have to be patient with me, Hannibal,” Will said, a flicker of uncertainty flitting across his beautiful face. “I’m not used to being loved. There is so much I don’t know, even still.”

“We’ll learn together,” Hannibal said, capturing Will’s wrist and bringing it to his lips to kiss the soft skin where his pulse beat.

“You abandon yourself to your impulses and indulge them,” Will said, shivering at the heat of Hannibal’s mouth against his skin. “Whereas I must seem so cold at times—”

“I have never found you so. You are cautious and thoughtful and not given to excess,” Hannibal whispered, bringing a smile to his husband’s face. He kissed Will’s palm before pressing it to his cheek and said, “I delight in your nature, Will. I delight in everything about you. You are a wonder to me, every bit a wonder to me.”

“As you are to me,” Will said, gripped with sudden shyness. He wanted to say those words as Hannibal did, with ease and sincerity, but they seemed trapped behind his teeth, lodged somewhere in his chest where he couldn’t seem to shake them free, no matter how much he longed to.

Yet it seemed to content Hannibal, by the unbridled pleasure that flowed into Will through his bond. He slid forward in the creaking chair with Will in his lap and teased his lips with another kiss, neither one able to resist the lure of the other. Will
shifted against him and Hannibal put a steadying hand on his thigh, absently sliding his fingers beneath Will’s silky wrapper to glide along his skin.

And he touched lace.

“Hannibal?” Will breathed into his mouth, surprised when his husband suddenly went still beneath him. Sudden realization made him grin, and he gripped Hannibal’s wrist to guide his hand higher, fingers tracing the edge of that lace around the top of his thigh to the round swell of his backside. “Do you disapprove?”

Hannibal’s mouth parted on a silent gasp, his eyes gleaming as he cupped Will’s bottom. He made no move to stop his mate when he slipped from his lap, but his hands curled to clasp the lingering warmth of Will’s skin as it faded.

Will slowly untied the sash on his wrapper, his deft movements still shadowed with shyness but his blue eyes alight with anticipation.

The silky material clung to his skin like a lover’s kiss, sliding in a near soundless whisper, slithering over the firm muscles of his arms to catch at the bend of his elbows before slipping free to pool at his slender feet.

Hannibal couldn’t breathe for a moment, couldn’t think or speak. Nothing in his experience with Will’s dangerous knees had prepared him for the sight of his sultry-eyed mate in a silk and lace bodysuit of such a deep red it appeared almost black in the firelight. It did everything Nichola promised and so much more, clinging to every curve and dip of Will’s firm body from his chest to the tops of his thighs, the thin straps so delicate it seemed a harsh look might snap them, the lace panels showing his skin beneath, the dark silk creased by the pebbled hardness of his large nipples and bulging at his groin to hold his impressive sex in place.

“Will?” Will asked, the corner of his mouth curving up, his faint reservations regarding the clothing evaporating in the face of Hannibal’s stunned delight. “What do you think? Still little better than a boy in a dress?”

Hannibal swallowed hard, just staring at his beautiful mate, but there was no mistaking the arousal that lay behind his stunned admiration and he made no move to dampen it for the sake of their bond. He hoped Will felt every bit of it, that it would speak so much more eloquently than he himself ever could.

“You’re not a boy, Will,” he finally breathed, reaching out to trace the line of his thigh where the firelight threw a shadow against the gleaming highlight on his smooth, hairless skin. “You’re an Omega, the best of both made one, strong when you need to be, soft when it suits you, but always everything I could ever ask for, and so much more that I never knew I needed until you gave it to me.”

It was an unexpected confession, his spontaneous ode to Will’s gender, a tender praise that Will sorely needed after the frustrations of their evening and his reminders of his father’s odious beliefs. The touch on his skin was electric, Hannibal’s desire for him matched only by his delight in his intelligence, his humor, his everything. Hannibal’s love spurred his desire, his need to touch borne of his need to immerse himself in Will, and it brought a self-conscious, pleased grin to Will’s mouth to feel the truth of it pouring through his bond.

- “You know,” he said, reaching out to smooth a stray hair from Hannibal’s brow, his fingers tracing a path down his temple to the high jut of his stark cheekbone, “you get this same look of dazed rapture on your face when you find me clever.”

“Do I?” Hannibal asked, gliding his fingertips up Will’s hip, the warmth of his mate’s skin beneath the soft lace and slippery silk enough to make him shudder with arousal. “That doesn’t surprise me. There is nothing so titillating in the world to me as a quick mind with a matching wit.”

“Not even a garter?” Will murmured, swaying to his touch, his lids lowering a fraction as his sex began to stir within the soft confines of the silk.

“Not even a garter,” Hannibal whispered, leaning into him to brush his nose up Will’s belly, finding his scent there beneath the fainter traces of soap and silk. His hands rose of their own accord, grasping Will’s hips, hard muscle shifting beneath an ever-so-slight softness that gave him such delightful curves. He pressed a kiss to Will’s belly, uttering a soft, possessive chuff as he caught the silk with his teeth.

Will threaded his fingers in Hannibal’s hair, purring as his husband’s mouth moved lower, soft lips and dangerous teeth a blunt pleasure over his clothing.
“You look more beautiful in this than even I dared imagine,” Hannibal said, his voice hoarse with desire, and Will’s hips twitched in a soft spasm when he rubbed those heavy Alpha fangs over the growing bulk at his groin. “I doubt I’ll ever survive what you do to me, Will.”

He lifted his head, gazing up the length of Will’s body to meet his gaze, his sculpted mouth parting in a grin when he added, “But I will certainly enjoy being done to death by you, my little Wolf.”

Will chuckled, thumbs smoothing Hannibal’s temples as he said, “Not for a long time, yet, Hannibal. I’ll try to warn you when my knees are loose.”

“Please don’t,” Hannibal said, sliding from the chair to loop his arms around Will’s waist. “There are worse ways to go than being ambushed by your beautiful body, Will.”

He bent and scooped Will up, hefting his weight easily into his arms to the tune of Will’s surprised laughter, bearing him to his massive bed where he sat with Will in his lap, their breaths mingling and their lips meeting in a soft kiss.

“Gods, I am the luckiest man in the world,” Hannibal breathed, groaning when Will’s bottom wiggled against his groin, his arms tightening as he arched up against him. He raked his teeth up Will’s jaw, careful and controlled but needy, the flitting touch of Will’s hands on him keying his senses tight.

“I hope you’ll always think so,” Will said, panting softly, wedging his hand down between their bodies to find the tie on Hannibal’s dressing gown. He fought the knot and pulled it free, pushing the material over Hannibal’s broad shoulders. “Because once I’ve set my mind on something, I’m not easily swayed from it. If you want to leave, you’d best do so now.”

“Gods, no, never again,” Hannibal whispered, twisting to lay Will down on his bed, rearing up to gaze down at him, mussed and half undressed and frightening in his beauty. Will reached up to trace the curve of his lip, moaning when his fingertips were caught and sucked, Hannibal’s tongue laving his skin. “I will never leave you again, Will. Not by choice, not if I can help it.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Will said, his arms dropping to the bed, loose and gently folded above him, one long leg lifting to brace his foot on the bed, cradling Hannibal in the open vee of his legs. He panted softly, chest heaving, belly caving with every breath above the turgid bulge of his sex.

Hannibal eased off of the bed, drinking in the sight of him as he shed the dressing gown, tossing it against the chair without looking. His light linen pants quickly followed, flung away with impatience and trembling excitement.

“I could marvel over you forever, Will,” he whispered, standing tall before him, every inch a virile Alpha in his prime, his rich scent promising pleasure and satisfaction, the heavy weight of his sex pulsing eagerly between his thighs in a dizzying display. It stirred beneath Will’s gaze and he felt a thrill of disbelief that he could accommodate it, his body growing soft and wet with anticipation.

Hannibal branded this moment into his memory—his beautiful, sultry mate gazing up at him with that gleam in his eyes, a vision of lithe limbs and limpid eyes and full lips, his mouth parted as if poised to scold him or praise him. He would gladly take either, and gladly spend the rest of his life anticipating which would come first, a coshing or a kiss?

Will moved against the bed, a slow undulation of his body that ended at his toes. He brushed his foot up Hannibal’s hip and down his thigh, his impish delight apparent in the way he smiled. For all his talk of coldness, Will was always so warm and responsive to Hannibal’s touch, curious and adventurous, yet gentle with him when others had never bothered to be.

“I swear to all the gods, the world reached its pinnacle of perfection in you, Will,” Hannibal breathed, his swollen sex giving another pulse as his eyes raked Will’s form once more, the delicacy of the silk and lace complementing the strength and sturdiness of Will’s toned young body.

“I was just thinking that very thing about you,” Will murmured, another slight arch of his back shifting him against the covers, unspoken invitation for his husband’s touch.

Hannibal’s hands clasped Will’s calf, cupping the firmness of it as he dropped a teasing bite on Will’s bent knee. He kissed the reddened skin, eyes closed, and nibbled a trail down the inside of his thigh, sighing with delight as his mate’s scent grew stronger with desire.

Will wriggled restlessly, his braced leg falling to one side as Hannibal kissed and sucked his way higher, every teasing whisper of lips and tongue pushing Will’s arousal to greater heights. The sensation of the silk over his heated, hard sex was
exquisite, a sensual pleasure all its own, but no match for the shivering tightness that gripped him to feel Hannibal’s hot breath spill over the crease of his thigh.

Hannibal eased Will’s legs further apart, stifling a moan to see how the silk had darkened between his legs, clinging wetly to his body, the pout of his slit revealed in every detail beneath the taut bulge of his sac. He stroked his fingertips over the puffy little lips that held Will from him, uttering a soft, please chuff when his mate twitched at his touch. He brought his fingertips to his mouth, the salty, meaty taste of Will’s body flavored with sweetness, an intoxicating combination Hannibal wanted to eat from his flesh with kisses.

“How can anyone be so beautiful?” he whispered, brushing his fingers up the fullness of Will’s sac to trace the straining length of him, quivering and trapped beneath a layer of silk, a spot of wetness growing where his tip pressed up tight.

Will pushed up on his elbows, trembling with arousal, snared by the sight of Hannibal crouched between his legs as if ready to devour him whole. His body surged in response to that image—the pleasure of feeling those sharp teeth in his flesh again, being pressed with Hannibal’s weight and thrashing for breath as he was brought to screaming release.

Hannibal grazed his fingers down his sex again and Will half sobbed, pushing against the touch. The light, teasing pressure over the slick silk felt like heaven and his head dropped back to bare his throat, long and gleaming in the firelight. He almost came out of his skin when the touch was followed by the dragging sharpness of Hannibal’s teeth over him, finding and lightly teasing his head through his clothing.

Will cried out, dropping back on the bed, one hand shooting out to clench in Hannibal’s hair, both warning and encouragement. He moaned with frustration when Hannibal delved between his thighs, needling more, canting his hips up against his husband’s seeking mouth. The delicate silk was no match for Hannibal’s sharp Alpha fangs; it tore with a soft purr of wet cloth and his hot tongue slipped beneath the fabric, curling up into Will’s body to plunge deep.

Will tipped his hips to Hannibal’s mouth, panting harshly when his clever tongue found and teased the tight ring of muscle that would trap his knot. His body clenched, squeezing down around him in a teasing echo of the pleasure to come, another sobbing moan torn from him when his sex was cupped and squeezed through the soft silk.

“How, Hannibal!” Will cried, a note of warning in his voice, his fingers giving a painful tug that neither of them noticed. He squeezed down around the curled knuckles working inside of him and arched up, sobbing with aching pleasure at the sensation of being sucked through his clothing, the sharpness of it muted but somehow amplified by the barrier between his needy sex and his husband’s clever mouth. He abandoned himself to it, arching in time with the pressure of Hannibal’s lips and tongue, feeling the weight of climax layering in his groin until it grew too much to contain.

It broke from Will on a shocked, gasped cry, his back arching and his hips canting, his legs drawing up as his body heaved and pleasure flooded him. Every nerve in his body sang with the force of it, a shudder shaking him as he spilled himself in Hannibal’s mouth, his seed greedily sucked from the cloth until he was a panting, writhing mess of raw nerve endings and relief.

Will’s body slowly relaxed around Hannibal’s fingers, the thrum of his sex slowing to a pounding pulse that echoed the thundering beat of his heart. Hannibal gave him one last lingering suck and lifted his head, easing back to admire the sight of Will before him.
“It’s ruined,” Will panted, relaxed and languorous in the afterglow, the reddened head of his sex sliding from beneath the slick fabric when he brushed his fingers down his belly.

“I thought it might be, the first few times,” Hannibal told him, bringing his slick fingers to his lips to suck them, eyes closing in bliss. He bared his fangs in a slight, wry smile when he said, “I ordered two of everything just in case I couldn’t control myself.”

“I like it when you can’t control yourself,” Will whispered, reaching for him.

Hannibal moved over him like a shadow, liquid with grace and purring with heady intent as he kissed his way up Will’s eager body. He found Will’s lips in the half darkness and kissed him breathless, letting Will taste the salty sweetness of himself on his lips. Will’s legs twined around his hips, pulling him close. Hannibal groaned softly at the feel of silk and hot flesh against his heavy body, the tightness of Will’s sac against his own, slick and firm above his wet, ready little entrance.

“You drive me to distraction,” he breathed, nipping Will’s earlobe, biting a trail of bruising kisses down the graceful length of his throat to dip his tongue into the hollow of Will’s collarbone.

“Nichola said you feared you might expire seeing me in such a thing,” Will teased, tipping his shoulder to urge Hannibal lower, his nipples tight and straining.

“This undergarment,” Hannibal said, plucking at the strap with his teeth before nuzzling the softness of Will’s petite breast, “a dressing gown, a bathing sheet—I would fear for my life seeing you in a flour sack, Will. You’re a menace to my rational thought.”

“No more than you are to mine,” Will said, breath catching on a hitching moan when Hannibal mouthed his nipple through the silk, lashing it with his tongue until the cloth starkly outlined his pert little peak.

Hannibal shifted onto his elbow, his hips pressing Will into the bed. He cupped Will’s chest with his hand, shaping the soft curve with his palm to mound it for his lips. His amber eyes rolled up to witness the pleasure on Will’s face with he sucked him, drawing on his nipple through the cloth.

Will moaned, the sound pulled from him in a throaty purr, his legs folding tighter around Hannibal’s naked hips.

Hannibal purred against his skin, rubbing Will’s flesh with the tip of his tongue before carefully closing his teeth around it. He gave it a slight, teasing tug and Will sobbed, surging beneath him in shocked pleasure. He wanted to take his time with Will, wanted to kiss every inch and pay homage to him, to love him and cherish him until they were both too exhausted to do more than fall asleep in one another’s arms.

Will untangled one hand from Hannibal’s hair and tugged at the strap, attempting to free himself, aching to feel his husband’s lips on his bare skin. Hannibal gave him another suck and ran his tongue along the neckline of Will’s lingerie, nudging and pushing and tugging it with such eagerness that the strap snapped free, the strain on the delicate fabric too great to withstand. He bared Will’s breast with a pleased growl of victory, rocking his hips against Will’s groin to feel the exquisite pressure against his eager sex.

The reddened, tight nub of Will’s large nipple strained from the slight curve of his breast, more delectable than any feast and more treasured than any precious stone. Hannibal bent his head and gave it the attention it was due, suckling Will until he squirmed and moaned, his slender body writhing with growing need.

“Hannibal,” he breathed, tugging on him, his slender legs pulling, urging him up. “Hannibal.”

“I want to take my time,” Hannibal said, his voice unsteady, trembling with the aching need to push himself deep inside of his mate and be as close to a single body as this world could ever grant.

Will pushed him up just a fraction, the torn neckline of his beautiful bodysuit baring his pale chest, his cheeks flushed with passion and his lips red from where he had sunk his teeth in a vain attempt to hold back his moans. He stroked his hand through Hannibal’s hair and rubbed his fingers beneath his jaw, whispering, “We have all our lives, Hannibal.”

“Gods, Will,” Hannibal moaned, seized with sudden frenzy, those words more powerfully arousing than they had any right to be. “I wish we never had to leave this bed again.”

“We don’t,” Will panted, groping down his body to touch him, cupping him and squeezing him to coax a thick dribble of wetness from his tip. Just the firm surety of Will’s fingers on him tested Hannibal to a dangerous degree. Will gave him a slow stroke and for a trembling, terrifying moment Hannibal feared he might spill himself against Will’s slick white belly and the torn remnants of his clothing.
“Sh,” Will soothed, sensing it, though it didn’t keep him from swirling his fingertips over the head of Hannibal’s sex, just as he knew he liked. “We have all night, every night, for as long as we like, Hannibal. I want you too much to be patient now.”

Will wiggled him into place, both of them breathless when he caught Hannibal’s sex between his legs, the warm, welcoming heat of his wet body slowly giving to the wide press of his head.

It was a sensation Will knew he would always delight in, a momentary panic that it was too much, that split second where he tensed for pain and instead felt the satisfying spread as he opened in welcome, sheathing Hannibal’s hard body like a velvety glove.

Hannibal’s breath left him on a deep, throaty moan as he settled deep, teetering on the cusp of orgasm with such immediacy that his knot was already rising. He worked his arms beneath Will, cradling him close, and rolled his hips in a slight motion that made them both groan.

It was slow and easy, bodies sliding together as one, rocking in an easy rhythm. They lay coiled together, scenting one another, touching one another and purring their pleasure.

“I love you,” Hannibal whispered, breathing it against Will’s lips, capturing his mouth with hungry kisses, saying it over and over like a prayer, the gentle roll of his hips pushing both of them closer and closer to the edge. The bond echoed his words, bringing Will almost to tears with the sweetness of it, every lonely moment of his past forgotten in the warmth of his husband’s loving arms.

Twined around one another as tight as they could manage, covered in kisses and treasured, it overcame them both as one and Hannibal pushed deep, shuddering as Will captured his knot with a soft cry, tying them together so much deeper than flesh and bone.

“I love you so much, Will,” Hannibal panted, wincing at the painfully sweet constriction that milked his orgasm from him in a slow, sweet pleasure almost unbearable in its intensity. He lay draped over Will’s pliant, relaxed body, entwined in mutual fulfillment and breathless with the force of it. Will arched against him, slow and studied, working his knot and rubbing the slick length of his sex against Hannibal’s furry belly, chasing another orgasm that came in a deep, aching rush, the contractions of it squeezing Hannibal’s sensitive sex and knot.

Their kisses grew less urgent, softer, soothing as the sharp peak of their pleasure subsided to the bliss of knotting. Will nuzzled him, languid and boneless as his body coaxed Hannibal’s knot with rhythmic squeezes, Hannibal’s euphoria feeding his own. It left him lingering on the border of satisfied sleep, one lazy lid lifting when Hannibal levered up enough to drag the tattered remnants of his clothes off.

+ “Such a shame,” Will murmured, smiling and stretching against the covers before subsiding.

“A damned fine investment, you mean,” Hannibal corrected, settling back over him in a drape of warmth. “Gods above, I never feel the difference in our ages more than in these moments, Will.”

“Despite your being an old man,” Will teased, smoothing Hannibal’s back and grinning when he stiffened, “I do enjoy myself immensely.”

“As well you should!” Hannibal said, delving into his throat with an offended growl. “Because I am an excellent lover.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Will said, biting his lip on amused smile at Hannibal’s indignant chuff. “When you’re too old to please me, I suppose I should take a younger man as a lover and find out.”

Hannibal lifted his head to stare at him, aghast, and Will chuckled, adding, “Several of them, even. No less than ten, I should think.”

Hannibal’s eyes widened painfully and Will dissolved into raspy laughter, stroking his face and planting a soothing kiss on his parted lips.

“You humor is perverse,” Hannibal informed him, an unwilling smirk curving his mouth as Will laughed, mirth dancing in his blue eyes.

“And yet he smiles,” Will teased, kissing him again, drawing his long legs up Hannibal’s and down again.

Hannibal’s smile softened, turning rueful when he quietly admitted, “You might need to someday, you know. When I’m too old to be of any use.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Will said, drawing him down to nuzzle him, a small shock of sensation jolting him from the shift of Hannibal within him. “I’ll still be able to wheedle you, even when you’re old.”
“Ah, Will, you are truly one of a kind,” Hannibal sighed, his deep chuckle rumbling in Will’s chest. He tuckled his nose in the bend of Will’s throat, rubbing his lips against the mark he’d left. His voice was soft and gentle when he whispered, “I wouldn’t condemn you for it, you know.”

“Hm?” Will asked, stroking his hair and nape, enjoying the comforting weight of his Alpha atop him. “Wheedling you?”

“Taking a lover,” Hannibal said, sighing against Will’s throat. “I would never begrudge you a moment’s happiness, Will.”

“That would never make me happy, Hannibal,” Will murmured, concentrating on the exquisite fullness that satiated him so thoroughly. “The pearl necklace you promised, however...”

Hannibal uttered a soft, throaty moan, a frisson of arousal running through him at the memory of Will in that gleaming pearl necklace.

“Though that wasn’t the one you had in mind,” Will teased, shifting beneath him. Both of them caught their breath as Hannibal’s slackened knot slid from Will’s tight body in a pulse of hot flesh and slippery seed.

“Well,” Hannibal said, lifting his head to kiss Will’s full lips, “we do have the rest of our lives.”

Will chuckled, their comfortable closeness interrupted by soft scratching at the washroom door. With a rueful brush of his lips over Hannibal’s, he murmured, “Winston apparently wishes to join us.”

“Well, we can’t have him being lonely and he chose an excellent time to push his luck,” Hannibal purred, easing himself slowly from Will’s body to lay at his side. He distracted himself with another soft kiss, reluctant to leave his mate, but grudgingly sat up when Winston began to whine. “He’s very lucky he means so much to you.”

“And you,” Will insisted, shivering with the loss of Hannibal’s heat when his husband left their bed, the glowing coals of the dying fire doing little to warm the vast room. He sat up and worked the layers of covers down, dragging them up over his naked body where they warmed quickly against his sweaty skin.

Winston leaped up on the bed, tail wagging with excitement as he nosed into the covers to find Will’s face and lick it, but even after his joyous reunion, Hannibal still hadn’t returned to their bed.

“Hannibal?” Will called, curious, absently stroking Winston’s head. He pushed up on one elbow when he heard his husband at his bureau, shifting things around in the near darkness, and gave Winston a push towards the foot of the bed, murmuring, “Lay down, Winston, you can stay on the bed.”

Hannibal stalked back towards him, the moonlight coming in through the part in the curtains turning his tawny skin pale gold. He was magnificent to Will’s eyes, his tall frame held with tight dancer’s grace, his broad shoulders straight, his hips lean above the taut length of his thighs as he moved to crouch at the bedside.

“What are you up to? Come back to bed,” Will urged him, cupping Hannibal’s high cheek in a firm caress.

“You’ve made your decision, Will,” Hannibal whispered, grasping his Will’s hand to kiss his knuckles. He made no move to rise; he knelt there at the bedside and gazed up at his husband, his amber eyes catching the light and pooling it, almost glowing in the darkness. “You can always change your mind, that is entirely yours to choose, but while you choose me, while you’ll have me, it would mean the world to me if you would wear this.”

He offered Will a familiar silver filigree box, opening the lid for him to bare the ring within, the fairy-tale woodland scene full of fey creatures and the dedication to a love long lost but never forgotten.

“With a memory like yours, there is little point in repeating myself, but I feel I must,” Hannibal said, watching as Will clasped the covers to his chest and shifted to sit up, his slender legs falling over the side of their bed.

“You know this is my mother’s ring, and that I’ve always kept it for the person I would share my life with as an equal,” Hannibal told him, smiling up at Will, the bond swelling with tenderness and hope. “I said it once at Marsham Heath and my certainty has only grown with time, Will. That person is you. That person will always and only be you.”

A soft, delighted laugh escaped Will’s lips, almost a sob, the sharp, almost painful love he felt threatening to overcome him. He pressed his hand to his mouth to stifle it, to hold it back somehow, but it escaped in happy tears that rolled down his cheeks to drip from his jaw.

“Will you wear it?” Hannibal whispered, reaching up to smooth his tears away, still holding the box aloft.

Will nodded, drawing a breath that shuddered, thick with tears. Hannibal plucked it up from the box, kissing Will’s fingertip before he slid the ring onto his finger.
It fit as if it had been crafted just for him, gliding onto his slender finger with ease to settle into place, engulfing his ring finger from the base of his hand to his knuckle in precious silver.

“I love you so much, Will,” Hannibal breathed. He bent his head over Will’s hand and kissed the ring, kissed his fingertips and the bend of his wrist, sighing with content happiness when Will’s hand spread to cup his face.

“And I love you, Hannibal,” Will whispered, the words soft and broken by tears but dizzying with joy, accompanying a wide, excited grin that made Hannibal’s heart leap in his chest.

Hannibal stared up at his husband, dumbfounded, but the bond said more than his words ever could—it swelled with such force that Will laughed with pleasure, leaning over to loop his arms around Hannibal’s neck in a tight embrace.

“Will,” Hannibal whispered, swallowing hard to force down the tightness in his throat, but it refused to be contained. He moved in one fluid motion to catch his little mate up and bear him back on the bed, Winston uttering a yip of indignation.

“Gods, say it again, Will, so I can be sure I heard it.”

“I love you, Hannibal,” Will said, his mouth curving in a smile as they scented one another, searching for home in the fragrance of skin and finding it waiting, just as it should be.

Hannibal’s sharp teeth grazed Will’s lower lip in a soft bite and he whispered, “Say it again.”

“I love you, Hannibal,” Will purred on throaty laughter when Hannibal kissed him.

“Say it again,” he asked, nibbling his way down Will’s chin.

“I love you,” Will said, and carding his hands through Hannibal’s hair to say it over and over, curling against Hannibal as his kisses deepened, inflamed by Will’s soft whispers of, “I love you, Hannibal. I love you.”

And no matter what might come, he knew he always would.

Will had the luxury of waking well-rested and comfortable, nestled in the curl of Hannibal’s warm body with his husband folded around him in a drape of heated flesh, his nose buried against Will’s throat and a soft, almost soundless purr rumbling from his chest.

Will wriggled his hand free from beneath the blankets and spread his fingers, a delighted smile curving his full lips. The swirls and whorls of the silver ring caught the faint morning light, the water almost appearing to ripple, the animals seeming to move. The metal had warmed to his body heat, already a part of him, as if he’d worn it all his life.

Always and forever...

Hannibal shifted, burrowing against Will with a soft, coaxing growl that settled back into a low rumble of sound. Will shivered, dropping his hand to rub Hannibal’s arm, toes curling as that purr vibrated down his spine.

“Every morning,” Will murmured, drawing Hannibal’s hand to his lips to kiss his knuckles before pressing them beneath his chin in a soft marking, answering Hannibal’s purr with his own. He shifted, turning to face his husband. The dim light caught on his cheek and the curve of his lip, casting the rest of his face into shadow, beautiful even with a night’s worth of stubble and relaxed in sleep. Will smoothed his hand up Hannibal’s jaw, smiling when his husband nuzzled against his touch.

With soft wonder, Will whispered to him, “This could be our every morning for the rest of our lives.”

It seemed nothing in the world could taint his happiness, now.

Except one minor detail of his past yet laid to rest.

Will pressed a kiss to Hannibal’s nose and eased out of the bed, slipping by small degrees from his clinging arms into the cold morning air. Hannibal curled around the warmth he’d left, grooping in his sleep for his mate, and it took every ounce of Will’s formidable determination to keep himself from crawling right back in there with him.

Instead, he tucked the covers up over his husband and hastily donned his wrapper, scooping up the lingerie with little hope for its recovery. He let himself through the washroom, grinning when Winston bounded to greet him with an excited bark.

“Good morning, my Lord!” Jimmy called, overseeing the fire being laid. “I hope we didn’t disturb you? Winston was desperate to go outside this morning.”

“You didn’t disturb me, Jimmy,” Will assured him, straightening. “Have any of our guests risen?”

Jimmy laughed a little and shook his head, saying, “Not at this hour!”
“Good,” Will said, steeling himself for what was to come. “Have Lord Reddig’s valet wake him and escort him to the dining room for his breakfast.”

“The dining room, my Lord?” Jimmy asked, plucking the lingerie out of his hand without even a glance. “Will you be joining him?”

“No,” Will said. “The only company he can tolerate in this house is his own, so he can eat alone while I have my bath. Have Mr. Hawkes put him in the sitting room when he’s finished and have Peter prepare his coach. Lord Reddig is leaving us this morning.”

Jimmy smiled and said, “It would be my absolute pleasure, my Lord.”

The drapes had been drawn wide in the sitting room, pouring the morning light in on the abundance of Hartford House. Statton Graham stood looking out at the grounds, his hands clasped behind his back and his posture ramrod straight, an echo of the Alpha who had seemed large as life to Will as a child.

He didn’t turn when Will entered, but Will could tell by the stiffening of his shoulders that he knew he was there.

“I expect you’ve something to say to me, having had me dragged from my bed at dawn like a servant,” Statton said.

“There’s a good deal I would say to you, Lord Reddig,” Will told him, approaching with alert awareness and stopping out of reach just behind him. “I’ll not do so with your back to me. Turn around, please.”

Statton turned, his blue eyes raking Will’s clothing, the gentleman’s gear he was more comfortable in worn in traditional Omegan fashion without a neckerchief, his collar open to bare his throat and display the mark of his mate’s sharp teeth.

“At least you’re dressed properly,” Statton said, not impressed by what he saw. “Mostly.”

“As much as it pains you to acknowledge it, Lord Reddig, I am Omegan, and dressed properly as such,” Will reminded him. “Please, have a seat.”

Will settled in one of the stiff little chairs near the window and gestured to the one across from him, staring at his father until Statton sat.

“Now what?” Statton asked, returning his stare, shifting his bulk in the chair. “Time to gloat, is it? Time to rub my nose in it?”

“No,” Will said, cocking his head to regard him, opening the door to his Gift all the way, giving his perception the freedom to see his father in ways he hadn’t since he was a very young child. “Merely a question, father.”

“Oh? And what is that?”

“Why do you hate me?” Will asked, sitting still and composed in his chair with his hands lax on the arms, no tension in his slender body whatsoever.

Statton’s face tightened, his eyes narrowing with consideration before he said, “Who says I do?”

“I say you do,” Will told him. “Your actions towards me say you do. You do not break a child’s fingers and call it love Lord Reddig. You do not have the staff hold a child down to beat the clothing from their back and say it has its roots in your concern for them. From my earliest awareness you have looked at me as something that does not belong, trained me to believe I am less than human, separated me from my sisters, built a barrier between their affections and my own until we were more acquaintances than siblings. It is... incredibly difficult for me to think you have dedicated yourself to such cruelty for no reason at all.”

“I corrected you, William,” Statton said, chin tipping up. “When you began on a path that would lead to your destruction, I steered you from it and ensured you would never take that path again.”

“Path?” Will echoed, mouth tightening. “My earliest memory is of you beating me for rocking Mina’s doll. What dangerous path did you imagine I was headed down in pretending to care for a baby?”


“I am not a boy!” Will said, reining in his temper with difficulty, a light tremble coursing through him. “I am not a boy. You curbed me from pursuits you considered feminine, you dressed me as male, addressed me as male, put me to work to educate me on positions only men were to hold, and yet in all of those things you continuously reminded me that I was not
your son! You forced me to be something I am not, and when I was every bit of it that I could be, you punished me for not being enough!"

He paused, the faint echoes of his voice dying in the large room, both of them staring hard at one another.

“You created a situation in which I could do nothing but fail, Lord Reddig,” Will said, drawing a slow breath. “Why?”

Statton didn’t answer for a long, taut moment. When he did speak, his voice was little better than a whisper, tight and ragged at the edges like old rope.

“You were the last one to be born, you know,” he said, mouth pursing with distaste. “Your sister came out with ease, but you went and got yourself stuck. You did so much damage to your mother that she was never able to bear another child. You were our last chance to have an heir. My last chance to have a son, and you ruined her.”

Will said nothing, only watching him with his Gift wide open, drinking in the details of his expressions as Statton spoke.

“You were supposed to be a boy,” Statton said, grim. “You were supposed to be a boy.”

Will blanched, his stomach churning. In a harsh, low whisper, he asked, “You truly blamed me for something I had no control over?”

“I blame you for ruining your mother!” Statton hissed, curling his hand into a fist to slam it on the chair arm. “I blame you for destroying my chances to have a proper son!”

Will stared at him, appalled that anyone could ever be so callous. The looming, powerful Alpha of Will’s memories, distorted to match the man with the fear he inspired, truly was nothing more than a petty old man, aged and angry and frustrated with failures he could not bear to claim responsibility for.

And so he displaced them onto an infant, preying on their helplessness, using his authority over them to exact retribution for a sin that simply didn’t exist.

“You and your habit!” Statton hissed, baring his teeth in a snarl of disgust. “Looking through people as if they were glass! You’re the reason she left us! She gave up because of you!”

“She gave up because she knew her husband was having an affair,” Will said, quiet and firm. “My Gift had no hand in that, Lord Reddig. Nor did my being Omegan have a hand in the fact that you cannot sire a son.”

Statton recoiled as if Will had slapped him, his eyes wide and furious.

“How many children have been born since mother died?” Will purred, cocking his head as he regarded his father. “Hm? How many children have your women given you, and not a single boy—”

“Shut your mouth!” Statton shouted, livid.

Will’s chin tipped up, his blue eyes hooded with thought as he regarded the man before him.

“You prancing little minx!” Statton snarled. “You think you’re so special, now? Hm? Acting like the Lady of the House, high and above it all! You’re a disgrace! Coming here groveling for that man’s favor, using everything I taught you for all the wrong reasons! Where is your pride, boy? Where is your dignity?”

Will stared at him, his face falling into a blank mask of indifference.

“You may have him wrapped around your little finger, but I know what you were about!” Statton growled. “You haven’t saved Hartford House for anything other than impressing your husband! When it comes down to it, you’ve become precisely the thing I tried to save you from being, William! Simpering and showing off for your husband like a brainless little bird in a gilded cage! You weren’t being useful here, you were attempting to seduce him back to your side! It’s all you creatures can understand, isn’t it? It’s all your nature compels you to do, and the worst part is, you don’t even realize it!”

“Oh, you are a piece of work,” Will said, shaking his head a little.

Statton’s face darkened with rage, but he said nothing in response, only glared at Will in fury.

“When I was a child, I did everything in my power to please you,” Will quietly said. “I wanted so badly to have something from you which you simply could not give, and you wanted something from me which I simply could not give.”

“How could any man be pleased by such a wretched excuse for a son?” Statton asked, trembling in his seat, breathing fast and hard with fury.

“How could any son of worth be raised by such a wretched excuse for a father?” Will asked, his blue eyes boring into Statton’s, pleased when he flinched. “My habit sees you, Lord Reddig. It has always seen you, even when I was a child. You’re weak.”
He stared at his father from beneath the fringe of his lashes, weighing him and finding him lacking in so many ways.

“An impotent, powerless creature without self-control who terrifies helpless children to make himself feel like a man,” Will said. “You’re not the stuff of nightmares, Lord Reddig. You’re routine. You’re common. You’ll never be anything more than a sum of failures doomed to watch your father’s legacy get passed along to someone who deserves it.”

Statton paled, his disbelief giving way to bleak horror.

“Your valet has packed your trunk. Your coach is waiting at the front door. You will leave this house, and once you cross that threshold, you will never darken my doorstep again,” Will said, gazing placidly at his father. “But before you go, just imagine for a moment, Lord Reddig, what might have been had you ever tried to love me. You’d have been father-in-law to one of the most powerful men in our country, invited to events that would have put you in the eye of Society, placed you hand-in-hand with those whose investments would enrich you. You would have been welcomed here, an intimate acquaintance of His Grace, grandfather to the children to come, and lacking nothing in life that we could provide you.”

Statton dropped his gaze, looking troubled for the first time Will could ever recall, as if it had only now occurred to him how badly he’d played the cards he’d been dealt.

“But you were so fixated on sacrificing me for Mina’s sake, so determined to exact your misplaced need for revenge on me that you threw it all away,” Will softly said, his Gift showing him the hairline cracks in his father’s armor, the tiny openings for his words to slide in swift as a blade to cut him. “And so here we are. I will spend my life quite happily allowing it to become common knowledge that you have fallen from my favor, and in a very short time our connection will be forgotten. You will return to Broadriver alone to brood in your machinations, sequestered out in the country where your beloved daughters refuse to visit you, and every word about me in every column of every paper you read will burn and twist in your gut like a live coal, and you have no one to blame but yourself.”

Will’s smile was tight and unpleasant, as frosty as his voice when he said, “I do hope I haven’t disturbed you unnecessarily. I should hate for you to have yet another regrettable mistake to trouble you.”

“So this is it, then?” Statton asked, drawing the tatters of his dignity around him, his pompous bravado hiding nothing from his son’s perceptive eyes. “We go our separate ways and make no move to deal each other wounds? Never set eyes on one another again?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, Lord Reddig,” Will said. He pushed to his feet, adjusting his ring with his opposite hand, standing tall and proud before the man who had always attempted to reduce him down to nothing. “You will see me once more, I can promise you that. When you’re old and failing in the twilight of your life, abandoned by the daughters you’ve lavished your love on, facing the grim specter of death, I will come to comfort you as you lay dying.”

A slight smile spread across Will’s lips, his voice falling to a low, purring sigh as he told the man who had abused him, “I will sit at your bedside watching you fade from this life, and I will console myself with the knowledge that your last sight in this world is of the child you despise. You can carry the memory of what you’ve done to face whatever just deserts you’ve earned.”

He smoothed his cuffs and jacket before ringing for Mr. Hawkes, aware of his father’s eyes on him, weighty and considering. Mr. Hawkes opened the door immediately, attentive and stiff with dignity.

“Please escort Lord Reddig to the door, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, giving him a tight smile and checking his pocket watch. “I would see it myself, but I haven’t the time.”

“Very good, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, openly disapproving of Lord Reddig, as if the man could not even rise from a chair in a way that would please Hartford House’s somber butler. “And should His Grace or His Lordship ask for you?”

“I’ll be upstairs,” Will said, drawing an even, relieved breath and tucking his pocket watch away. “I’d like to relax for a bit before our day starts and tying some lures seems just the thing.”

“Naturally, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, pushing the door wide to open the way for Lord Reddig.

Will whistled Winston to his side and headed for the stairs, his ears tuned to the sounds of Lord Reddig being shown the door. He thought he might look back in the end, heeding the irresistible urge to see his father packed off like unwanted baggage, but he didn’t.

His future lay before him, after all, and there was nothing left behind him that was worth a moment more of his precious time.
Hannibal tossed in his bed, dreaming of Galley Field as it had been when he was still a little boy. He could hear his father sobbing. Everything seemed to loom around him, a child’s perception of a world not scaled to suit him.

_I remember this..._

He found his father with the silver filigree box in his hand, head hanging, knuckles white, weeping a name he knew was his mother’s because Aunt Grace had told him so.

‘Papa, don’t cry,’ he said, and he felt deep and terrible dread, because he _remembered_ this.

‘Leave me alone,’ his father moaned, choking on his tears, wretched with grief and swaying from a half-empty decanter, his tears stinking of alcohol.

‘Papa...’

‘Get away from me!’ Papa sobbed, huddling in on himself.

He can’t bear the sight of me...

‘Papa, please don’t cry, I’m here—’

‘And she’s not!’ Papa looked at him, red-faced and half mad, his trembling hand reaching for the bottle to tip it to his mouth. ‘Because of you... How could you? How dare you be here? How dare you? Why do they love you so much, Hannibal? First Saule and now father, as if I couldn’t have given them a dozen just like you had she lived...’

He smelled her before he saw her and the grown man thrashing in his bed knew she was there behind him, his father’s concubine, the Lady Murasaki.

‘Cyrus, you’re frightening him.’

The inflection, the soft pronunciation, the sigh that filled every word—as familiar to him as his own face—but he didn’t want it, didn’t want to remember her so clearly.

‘What would you know? You jumped at the chance to take her place! You’re as bad as he is! Both of you are nothing! Wretched little hangers-on!’

Hannibal began to cry, the child he’d been not understanding, the man he was understanding all too well.

‘You cannot speak to a child this way—’

‘Shut up! J-just shut up!’

Her hands dropped to his shoulders. He could feel the curve of her fingernails through his clothes.

‘Come away, little fawn, your father is mad...’

‘You don’t get to judge me!’ His father shouted, and threw the case at him, flung it with such force that Hannibal flinched.

But she was there, Jasmine sweet and the only mother he’d ever known, crouched with her arms around his trembling body, the silver box bouncing off of her thick clothing to skitter across the floor.

Hannibal stared into her dark brown eyes and cried in earnest while his father sobbed and raged.

‘It is only grief, little fawn,’ she said, calm in the face of his father’s upset. ‘Hush now, and go back to sleep.’

‘Mother—’

‘This is not your mother!’ Cyrus shouted, looming into his face to shout it, his horror written in the lines around his eyes, in the sour stench of alcohol blown out on his breath. ‘Do you understand that? She is not your mother! Your mother is dead! You killed her! You took her away from me, Hannibal, like you took everything else!’

Hannibal clenched his teeth in his sleep, trapped in that memory, that moment he’d buried deep beneath the years of his life. The child he’d been began to sob, frozen in place with indecision, frightened and confused.

‘Tell him!’

She flinched, wincing when he shouted, raging like a wounded bull. Softly, she said, ‘I am not your mother—’

‘Say it!’

‘I am not your mother, little fawn,’ Lady Murasaki said, her feelings contained behind the gleam in her dark eyes, walled up behind a fort of stoicism built brick by brick through the days of her life. ‘Your mother is dead.’

‘Why is she dead? Why is she dead?!’

‘Your mother is dead... because you killed her...’
‘That’s right,’ Cyrus said, and his ugly, miserable laughter overrode Hannibal’s frightened crying. ‘You should thank him, Murasaki. If he hadn’t killed her, you wouldn’t even be here, would you? Go on. Go on.’

‘Thank you, little fawn,’ she said, a lone tear slipping from her eye and sliding down the still surface of her impassive face. ‘Thank you for killing her.’

‘If I ever hear him call you his mother again, I swear to all the gods I will make you wish you’d never set eyes on me! Saule deserved so much better than this...’

Hannibal thrashed in his sleep, fighting the memory. He fought his way free of his dreams, waking with a gasp, one hand reaching for Will.

The bed was empty and he was quite alone, not even Winston was left behind. All that remained was the sweet heat of Will’s scent tinged with spent sex in a richness that made his mouth water reflexively.

He sat up, catching his breath as his pounding heart slowed its pace. The scent of Jasmine seemed to linger in the air, teasing his nose with memories he’d thought long forgotten, dredged up from handling the little box again last night.

‘...keep it hidden, little fawn... never tell him that you have it...’

Hannibal groped for the little silver box that had held his mother’s ring for nearly forty years. He’d never questioned how he’d come to have it, not once in all these years. He’d assumed either Aunt Grace or Aunt Margaret had seen to it after his father’s death, but his dreams spoke of a far different story.

“I called her mother,” he breathed, rubbing his thumb over the filigree, the details of his dream slipping away from him, but it bubbled beneath the surface of his awareness, waiting until his heart agreed with his mind enough to bear the revelations it promised.

The lock clicked and Berger let himself in, calling, “Good morning, m’Lord! Thought I’d check and see if you’d woke, yet.”

“Have I overslept?” Hannibal asked, a slight smile chasing away his strange unease, the last vestiges of his dreams wisping away like smoke.

“I wouldn’t say so, m’Lord,” Berger said, chuckling as he stirred up the fire.

Hannibal slipped from the bed, shrugging on his discarded dressing gown and tying it closed at his waist, asking, “Has Will been up long?”

“He was gone before the maids came to lay the fire, m’Lord,” Berger said, straightening. “Price said he left some orders regarding Lord Reddig, had his bath, and was out the door with Mr. Winston before the cock crowed.”

“Lord Reddig?” Hannibal asked, a pang of concern darkening his brow when he thought of Will’s father. “Did Price mention what?”

“No, m’Lord,” Berger said, moving into the washroom to draw him a bath.

“Where is Will now?” Hannibal asked, working his feet into his slippers before daring the tile floor of the bathroom.

“I couldn’t say,” Berger said. “I’ll ask Mr. Hawkes. He’ll know, if anyone would.”

“Yes, do, please,” Hannibal said, worried. “I’m afraid my husband might’ve had a clash with Lord Reddig. He’ll have come out on top, but I must see for myself that he’s taken no wounds for it.”

“Naturally, my Lord,” Berger said, filling the sink with hot water for Hannibal to shave. “I’ll have you set up in your dressing room when you’re finished, m’Lord, and check on his Lordship in the meantime.”

“Thank you, Berger,” Hannibal said, hurrying to shave as the tub filled, anxious to lay eyes on his mate and desperately hoping that Will’s father hadn’t dealt him more wounds that would scar.

Chapter 48

Eager as he was to set eyes on his mate, Hannibal made quick and thorough work of cleaning himself up. His dream of Lady Murasaki teased at his awareness, a restless ghost trailing cold fingers over the heart that had been so hardened against her. He wished he could recall it in detail to share with Will, but it slipped from him by the second, murky and muted.
“Ah! There you are!” Berger called, closing the dressing room door behind him and hurrying to assist him, though Hannibal was nearly dressed already. “I spoke with Mr. Hawkes, m’Lord. Gods above, if you don’t have a match in his Lordship, then the sun won’t rise tomorrow!”

“And I thank the gods every moment for it,” Hannibal said, amused by Berger’s flushed delight. “Quickly, now, Berger, and tell me what’s happened. Is he well?”

“I’d say so, m’Lord,” Berger said, tying Hannibal’s neckerchief as he spoke. “According to Price and Mr. Hawkes, he had Lord Reddig out of bed and breakfasting in the dining room before the house was up, got his bags packed while he ate, and sent him off before you even cracked an eyelid.”

Hannibal stared at him, amber eyes wide with surprise as Berger spoke.

“He sent him home?” He asked, shocked. “Without speaking with him?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, m’Lord,” Berger said, fussing with Hannibal’s coat. “He spoke with Lord Reddig in the sitting room for a time and had Mr. Hawkes show him the door as his Lordship was too busy to see to it himself. Said he wanted to tie some lures.”

“Gods,” Hannibal breathed, a small smile teasing his lips.

“I had a fair time picturing it, m’Lord,” Berger confided, brushing Hannibal’s jacket with a fervor. “Lord Reddig eating all alone in that giant dining room and packed off back home like a spoiled child not fit for adult company. I imagine he was stewing in it all the way! His Lordship as good as paddled him and sent him to his room with no supper!”

“That he did,” Hannibal said, checking his reflection, grinning as he thought of his somber, ferocious little mate having the butler see his father off because he had better things to do. “I wish I’d seen it, I truly do. He told Hawkes he was tying lures?”

“Yes, m’Lord,” Berger confirmed. “He said he wanted to relax a bit and that seemed the best way.”

“What did Hawkes make of him?” Hannibal asked, his amusement giving way to fresh concern.

“Oh, he seemed composed enough, but he always does,” Berger reminded him. “Price is about the only one besides yourself who can read him, m’Lord. Mr. Hawkes said he just needed some quiet, is all. He took Mr. Winston with him and headed upstairs.”

“Thank you, Berger,” Hannibal said, turning from the mirror with a satisfied nod. “I’ll find him and check on him. Please let me know when our guests start to rise, hm?”

“Will do, my Lord!” Berger called after him as Hannibal quit the room.

No one was stirring even still as Hannibal made his way to the servants’ passage, frightening the daylights out of a maid on her way down. He caught the faint trail of Will’s sweet scent and followed it up, bypassing the floor where the staff were housed and reaching the narrow risers to the attic proper.

A faint sound caught his attention as he reached the landing, the soft echo of a piano just slightly out of tune. The sound strengthened the closer he got, Will’s husky, pleasant voice lifted in song, accompanied by the muted sound of a piano giving out a doleful melody. It lured him down the narrow hallway to the open archway of Hartford House’s storage, where generations’ worth of collected interests lay stacked and shoved and covered in sheets.

Winston met him there, tail wagging and tongue lolling. Hannibal stooped down in the archway to greet him, spying Will seated at an old piano long-since retired from public view due to a long life of hard knocks. The light from the attic windows turned the dust motes in the air to flecks of gold, the pale morning glow a shimmering mist playing around Will’s form. It gleamed on his soft curls and pulled indigo highlights from his dark jacket, which gave Hannibal an enviable view of his broad shoulders and slim waist as he played. His pale fingers moved with swift assurance, coaxing a tune from the piano that, while not precisely in tune, lent its own unsettling eeriness to the song he sang with such quiet but helpless abandon. It was a mournful piece about the riverside, somber, hauntingly beautiful, and sung with a sweet skill Hannibal had no idea he possessed.

The last humming piece of the music faded and Will sighed, folding his hands carefully into his lap, lost in thought and staring into the distance as if miles away. He looked so removed that Hannibal was taken by surprise when he said, “Good morning, Lord Clarges.”

He turned on the bench ever so slightly, his smile warm and wan but welcoming. “What on earth are you doing up here?”
“I was told your father left Hartford House this morning,” Hannibal said, straightening to approach his mate. “I worried you might’ve had words with him.”

“Oh, I had words with him,” Will admitted, absently reaching out to stroke Winston’s head when the eager little dog came and nudged him for attention.

Hannibal moved to the bench and Will scooted over to give him room, sitting pressed flank to flank there before the keys. The nearness soothed them both, the reassurance that neither was out of reach. Separation was becoming more difficult to bear, the lack of a bond notwithstanding—even an inch seemed a gulf to wide to be borne.

“I had no idea you had such a beautiful singing voice,” Hannibal said, sensing his mate’s unease, wishing he had a way to close the distance, some insight into Will such as Will had into himself. “I find myself entranced by an unexpected treat.”

“Remind me to entrance you with a more appropriate song,” Will said. “This one isn’t suited to a drawing room.”

“I arrived too late to hear the entirety,” Hannibal said. He flexed his fingers, splayed them over the keys, and began to play. His perfect rendition of the song brought a surprised, pleased smile to Will’s face, note-for-note in perfect imitation, “but can I assume the rest is just as melancholy as the parts that I have heard?”

Will nodded, his blue eyes searching Hannibal’s face as he said, “I don’t think of it as a sad song, though I suppose it is. My nurse used to sing it to us as small children.”

He took over the keys at his end, amused by Hannibal playing notes around him, rendering the song nearly unrecognizable with lightness, but it seemed suitable somehow. He had touched every sadness in Will’s life and transformed it—this, too, would become something entirely new beneath Hannibal’s tender regard.

“As we grew up, we would sometimes still sing to one another,” Will said, half lost in the memories of his youth, pensive with unhappy reflection, “when one or the other was sad or frightened.”

“Are you sad and frightened now?” Hannibal asked him, hardly able to pay attention to his fingers, his attention was so fixated on Will. Every flick of his eyelashes, every small stir of his breath, every quirk of his lips was a masterpiece, the gods’ own blessing made flesh, and encased in all of his beauty was a mind so curious and complex it left Hannibal nearly mute with awe.

It was that curious and complex mind he worried for, and the vast heart behind it that took wounds without remark, doing his best to hold the broken edges together on his own without letting the pain of it ever show.

“Not now, but yes I was feeling sad and frightened. It was faint, like something from a dream,” Will murmured, turning his head to watch his husband, his fingers playing of their own accord. “By the time I realized it was coming through the bond, it had already faded. I thought perhaps you were dreaming, or remembering something terrible. It was muted, but awful. I felt like a child again, adrift without safe harbor.”

Hannibal dropped his gaze to the keys, playing with care as he gathered his thoughts.

“Twas dreaming,” he finally said, vague shadows drifting through his memories, an impression of despair and dread without substance. “Dreaming of my childhood at Galley Field.”

Will said nothing, his arm brushing Hannibal’s as they played. There was no expectation in his silence, only an offer for attentiveness, the understanding that his frightening perception allowed for.

“I called her ‘mother’, the Lady Murasaki,” Hannibal whispered, the prickle in his sinuses surprising him. “I think she may have given me my mother’s ring. I think she may have protected me, but I cannot recall much beyond being sad... and frightened.”

Hannibal abandoned his improvisation to play along with Will, dirge that the song was, and softly asked, “Is that what prompted you to play this, Will? To comfort me as I dreamed?”

“It would have been a greater comfort to us both had I come to wake you,” Will said, his smile sad and wry. He began to sing again, the words a purring hum of sound below his breath, his bright blue eyes turned shyly up to Hannibal’s.

“There’s something very soothing about the constancy of a river, isn’t there? A reminder that life continues no matter the circumstances,” Hannibal murmured to him, listening to Will’s soft, throaty voice sing of death, of resignation to one’s sorrows, a tragic ballad taught to a child as a lullaby. “The relentless force of a river’s current.”

“The inevitability of time,” Will said, his quick and nimble fingers moving smoothly over the keys. “The brevity that is a life. We are all insignificant in the end.”
“Pebbles thrown in the river?” Hannibal inquired, already longing to hear Will sing to him again. “Even a tiny pebble makes a ripple. Yet, I wasn’t the only one you were comforting, Will. Did he say something to displease you?”

Will’s fingers almost paused on the keys in the slightest tell of reaction, his sudden tension like ashes on Hannibal’s tongue.

“I was told you had him up breakfasting alone and evicted him from the house first thing this morning,” Hannibal said, picking the song back up at the beginning, a glance showing him how preoccupied Will had become. “I understand you spoke privately with him in the sitting room. I certainly wish I’d been there to witness it.”

“So do I,” Will said, a rueful smile teasing his lips.

Hannibal did not hesitate to say, “If he has offended you in any way, Will—”

“Only with his presence,” Will said, shaking his head. “It’s behind me, now. He is behind me now.”

“Yet something troubles you,” Hannibal said, playing quietly for a little bit longer before his mate spoke again.

“He had his say, as I had mine,” Will said, a rueful smile teasing his lips. “Mine were the last words, however, so I believe I won that round.”

“Nothing less than I would expect of my brilliant mate,” Hannibal said, nudging him with his elbow, coaxing a soft laugh from him. “He’s a jealous old fool. He never stood a chance against you, Will. The ripples from that particular pebble will no doubt make lasting waves; not so insignificant after all.”

“Gracious words from a boulder,” Will said, smirking when Hannibal quirked a brow his way. “Some people expect to cause ripples, others pray they do not.”

“What do you imagine you are, Will?” Hannibal asked, subtly shifting into a song he’d learned as a boy. To his great delight, Will followed his lead without hesitating.

“I’ve spent my entire life avoiding ripples,” Will said, concentrating on the music as it was not as familiar to him. “When I was a child, I was desperate to vanish. As an adult, I think I must not have changed in that respect.”

Hannibal absorbed that, angling a long, considering look at Will’s beautiful profile.

“Interesting that you think so,” he finally said, enjoying the ease of their duet. “You’ve tamed Society’s villainous Lord Clarges and charmed the Capital as a Courtesan Wolf. Our collective staff would turn out en masse with pitchforks to hunt down anyone who dares to speak ill of you. You’ve brought a murderer to justice and saved countless lives in doing so, including the life of my stepdaughter. Our estate is abundant, our tenants are happy, and the land is flourishing. There is even a proper road that connects us to the world and a rail station soon to arrive—I’d say you make waves more than ripples, Will. You’re truly a force to be reckoned with.”

Will stopped abruptly, his fingers still on the keys, his father’s words from their last conversation returning to haunt him.

Hannibal, surprised by his sudden, strained silence, stopped playing as well and turned a little to gauge his strange reaction. “Will? Have I said something to upset you?”

“No, only...” Will frowned, and said, “I do not see it as such.”

“You’ve brought change to our family—to me—that was long overdue,” Hannibal said, watching the minute flickers in Will’s blue eyes, taken by the way a light pink blush flooded his cheeks. “I’d say you’ve rather excelled at ripples. Wouldn’t you?”

“That was not my intention,” Will said, shaking his head. “I only ever wanted to be useful.”

“Will,” Hannibal chided him, bewildered by his strange reaction. “The things you’ve managed would make any man burst with accomplishment. You, of all of us, deserve to enjoy your successes.”

“It’s only that from a boulder’s point of view,” Will said, strangely subdued, his eyes weighty and moiiling with doubts that had no business existing. “I exerted myself for no other reason but to garner your approval and appreciation in an attempt to ingratiate myself into your good favor.”

Hannibal stared at him, taken aback and only able to surmise that Lord Reddig’s parting words had cut deeper than his mate was willing to admit.

“For so generous a person, you are so remarkably ungenerous in regards to yourself,” Hannibal told him, cocking his head slightly. “You should be proud of everything you’ve managed in your life, Will. From a boulder’s perspective.”
The delicate blush that followed prompted Hannibal to lean closer to him, a curl of anticipation unfurling within him when Will merely held still. The sadness in his limpid blue eyes rapidly faded away, replaced by a hungry gleam Hannibal recognized as much by instinct as familiarity.

Hannibal’s lids swept closed as he brushed his mouth over Will’s, savoring the softness of the dewy skin beneath his lips, his heart pounding when Will’s breath came out on a slight, blissful sigh. He traced the tender bow of Will’s full mouth with the barest tip of his tongue, plumbing the crease to test his sharp little Omegan fangs, tasting the sweet traces of mint and coffee that lingered on his mate’s lips.

“Do you know what a priceless gem is before it is cut and polished, Will?” Hannibal murmured against him, sharp teeth bared in a sudden grin. “A pebble.”

It was worth the awful joke just to see Will smile and hear his raspy, exasperated laughter. The sound of it was like velvet on Hannibal’s skin, all the more seductive for its carelessness. He astonished himself by wondering how feasible it would be to undress Will right there at the piano, to change his laughter to gasps of pleasure and drown his pensive thoughts in joy. The appetites he had once turned his nose up at now surprised him with their strength, but Hannibal knew should Will ever turn from him, he would never feel this for anyone else in the world. It was only for Will, only for his touch, for his smile, for his love.

“Part of me wants to press you for details, because I know it troubles you and I wish to take the burden, if I may,” Hannibal purred, dipping his nose against Will’s throat to fill his senses with his mate’s unique scent. “But your silence is your own to keep, Will. When you are ready, should you ever be ready, I will listen and lighten the load you bear.”

Will tipped his head, baring more of his throat to Hannibal’s questing nose. “What of the other part, Hannibal?”

“The other part,” Hannibal said, his breath whispering over Will’s skin to spill into the collar of his shirt, chasing a shiver he couldn’t repress, “prefers to make you smile again.”

“Then I suggest you kiss me,” Will whispered, eyes slitting closed when Hannibal nuzzled him, lips brushing his skin so faintly they woke goose-flesh in a ripple down his body. “Or tell me more terrible jokes.”

“Well, I know which I prefer,” Hannibal murmured, trailing his mouth up Will’s jaw, his eyes dancing with delight. “Telling you terrible jokes, of course.”

- Will opened to the soft touch of Hannibal’s tongue, leaning into the gentle pressure of fingers on his jaw that urged him to turn. He tipped his head for a deep, questing kiss that curled his toes, his fingers clenching in Hannibal’s jacket, kneading the firm muscle of his arms.

There was tenderness in every stroke of their tongues, a sensual delight in the play of lips and teeth and quickening breath. It held the echo of every kiss ever shared between them, still gentle, still exploratory, yet tinged with new understanding of one another. Urgency gave it the flavor of ferocity—to taste, to tease, to meld together without space between them until they were one.

Hannibal broke the kiss to draw a shaky breath and Will trailed his lips up the hollow of his cheek, gasping softly when Hannibal’s fingers curled against the base of his skull and tugged him closer, his other hand coming to rest on Will’s slender hip where his thumb brushed a relentless, soothing rhythm in the tender cup of his hipbone.

“Hannibal,” Will breathed, snatching a quick breath. He was happily overwhelmed with another kiss, his eyes sweeping closed when his husband’s achingly clever mouth slid from his lips to his jaw and lower, seeking out and finding the mark on his neck. The sensation of hot breath, sharp teeth, slick tongue and soft lips on his scar brought his body to tingling awareness, his heart pounding with excitement.

The ugliness of his final exchange with his father faded beneath the hungry, coaxing touches of his husband. Will was a boulder, if only to his mate—special and brilliant and beautiful, inspiring the love that poured into him through the bond. Every kiss, every soft touch, the pleasure that followed with the surety of the tide, all of it was testament to the deep connection they shared. There would never be another person in this world to understand Will as Hannibal understood him, and no one would ever understand Hannibal as Will himself did. There was an aching perfection in the way they came together, an urgency that both of them knew would never die down between them, and it fueled their passion all the more.
“You should be telling me to stop,” Hannibal whispered, his voice husky and low. His hands slid to make quick work of loosening Will’s jacket and waistcoat, finding and plucking the buttons of his shirt to bare his belly. He ran his warm hands up the soft, smooth skin of Will’s sides, muscle drawing tight beneath his grazing fingertips.

“Would you have me believe that you would listen?” Will teased, rather breathlessly managing to say it before Hannibal kissed him again, demanding and deep.

“To you?” Hannibal asked, grazing his sharp teeth over Will’s jaw and down the other side of his slender neck. “Always, anything, and well you know it.”

Will laughed softly, breaking on a moan when Hannibal unfastened his pants, hasty and needy. “That is quite a bit more power than I truly possess.”

Hannibal pulled back just far enough to rapidly unbutton the rest of Will’s clothing, baring him from his delicate throat all the way to his navel where his pants gaped open. He stopped then for a moment, drinking in the sight of him, his pale and beautiful mate, his cheeks flushed pink and his slender frame trembling softly with excitement.

“It is every bit a power you possess, and it is far more dangerous than even your marvelous thighs,” Hannibal softly told him, tracing a path from Will’s cheek down his throat to his sternum, lower still down the slight ditch of his stomach to his lower belly where muscles fluttered and tightened beneath his touch. Perhaps even now their child was there waiting, growing, the culmination of their mutual desire and love. He settled his palm low on Will’s belly in a soothing, protective caress and said, “All you ever need do, Will, is say the word, and I will stop.”

Will wet his lower lip with the tip of his tongue, cat-quick. His blue eyes were hazy, sultry and half-lidded when he breathed, “I will never ask you to stop, Hannibal.”

He said it with a touch, reaching up to lay his hand against Hannibal’s cheek. The shiver that racked his husband was echoed in Will, every nerve tightening with anticipation, with arousal that he could have such an effect on Hannibal with only the brush of his fingers. He teased a kiss up Hannibal’s jaw to sigh into his ear, “But I have no intentions of being the only one in a state of disarray.”

His firm, hot little hand swept down Hannibal’s chest, catching on buttons, skimming over the cloth until he found the waiting bulk of Hannibal’s sex, half-hard and heavy, no amount of expert tailoring able to disguise the fact that he was very much an Alpha male.

“Play for me, Hannibal,” Will purred, closing his hand around that tempting bulge of flesh, a painful jolt of hunger pulsing through his belly when Hannibal arched into his touch with a low groan. “Play for me...”

Hannibal slid his trembling hands to the keys and began to play, eyes half closed as Will slowly peeled apart the layers that encased him—jacket, waistcoat, shirt—until he was able to break open Hannibal’s pants.

The first butterfly-light touch on the bunched muscle of his belly made Hannibal’s breath stutter and his eyes close, head tipping against the mouth that gently sucked and bit his earlobe. Will pressed to his side, skin tightening at the touch of rough cloth against his exposed chest. He stroked his fingers through the hair on Hannibal’s chest, his palm filled with the echo of his pounding heart. The soft texture of his nipple was silky beneath Will’s fingertips, begging a teasing tug. Will gently rubbed his thumb over it, smiling around a mouthful of Hannibal’s earlobe when his husband’s hands crashed down on the keys in a moment of breathless arousal.

“Keep playing,” he urged, tracing the curve of muscle down the length of his belly, sliding through rough hair and over hot skin to find that softness Hannibal was so oddly incensed by. Will gave it a squeeze, curling his tongue into Hannibal’s ear as his husband continued to play.

The heat welling up from Hannibal’s groin begged exploration that Will was only too glad to give. He walked his fingers past the open lip of his pants to sweep over him, firm and trapped within his clothing by his own excitement.

Will grazed his teeth from Hannibal’s ear to his jaw and squeezed the swollen head of his sex through his pants, moaning when Hannibal’s back arched hard and his playing turned broken and jumbled.

“Don’t be cruel,” Hannibal whispered, panting and helpless as Will firmly stroked him, his fingers sliding up to cradle the heavy flesh of his sac. “Please, Will...”

“You never seem to listen when I say please,” Will reminded him, tugging Hannibal’s neckerchief loose with his free hand to lay biting kisses down the cords of his throat. The pleasure he felt through his bond only amplified his own arousal, filling
him with awed delight that he could awaken such a heady response from his powerful mate. He touched Hannibal’s belly again, swirling his fingers down into the open waist of his pants to work his hand into the taut cloth.

He was hot and silky, jumping against Will’s coaxing touch, his scent musky with need and his teeth clenching on a cry as Will’s hand slid down the length of him.

“Gods!” Hannibal gasped, hips shifting in an aborted thrust, even so small a movement loosening the cloth to give his mate better access.

Will took full advantage of it, breathing against Hannibal’s throat, “Keep playing,” before he began to stroke him, gathering the welling moisture from his tip to slide along his skin.

Hannibal played as if the world might end should he stop, the only accompaniment his raspy, helpless groans and the soft jostle of the bench as he tightened and rocked against Will’s hand.

Will purred against his throat, clinging to him with one arm, his other working with slow, steady surety to bring his mate to a frenzy. When Hannibal grew tight and tense, his moans desperate and helpless, only then did Will breathe, “Stand up, but keep playing.”

Hannibal rose, uncertain if his wobbly legs would hold him, no idea in the world what he was playing, only knowing that it was what his mate wanted. The discordant piece was hardly cover enough for the sound he made when Will slid his loosened pants down, baring his aching, ready sex to the cool air. He didn’t resist when Will pulled him back down, his bare backside on the padded piano bench.

“Keep playing,” Will whispered, smiling when Hannibal twitched and groaned as his swollen sex was grasped. He eased back just enough to give himself room and wrapped his lips around Hannibal’s straining, flushed head.

“Gods, Will!” Hannibal hissed, head falling back as his mate suckled him, one hand slowly stroking his length to meet his full lips. It was unbearable pleasure, a dangerous pleasure that threatened to make him erupt and he brokenly begged his mate to caution, warning him and pleading with him until his ragged sobs nearly drowned out the jangling cry of the piano.

He wanted to bury his hands in Will’s curls, bury himself deep in his warm throat. Instead, he played with a fury, desperately battling the orgasm that edged closer with every swirl of Will’s tongue, every slight touch of his sharp teeth, every soft crush of his wet cheeks caving around his sex.

He moaned Will’s name like a prayer, offering up himself as a sacrifice, unworthy though he was. He arched his back and clenched his teeth, sobbing with mingled relief and loss when Will drew off of him with a lingering, teasing suck.

“Will,” he whispered, just the sight of his reddened lips and flushed cheeks and mussed curls enough to nearly tip Hannibal right over the edge of orgasm.

Will smiled at him, the tip of his tongue flicking over his lips as if to savor the taste of Hannibal’s flesh. He pushed to his feet, the spill of his loosened clothing hiding the firm jut of his ready sex. He pulled Hannibal’s arm down and slid himself in the small, tight space between the bench and the piano. One graceful, pale hand swept his clothing to fall at his sides, the other pushing his loosened pants down just enough to bare the pearly-pink, throbbing length of him. He settled back against the keys in a cacophony of soft notes, one hand braced to hold his weight, and whispered, “Play for me, Hannibal.”

Hannibal wet his lips, dipped his head to draw his mate’s offered body deep into his mouth, and played with a frenzy around him.

It was a mess of sound with part of the keys beneath his mate’s delightfully round bottom, but Hannibal didn’t care. There was no music more pleasing or beautiful to him than Will’s delighted cries, than the fretful moans he uttered as Hannibal’s mouth slid along his strutted length. He played and played, and when Will’s hand clenched in his hair, forcing himself to the hilt in Hannibal’s greedy mouth, he found the notes that rang out in tune with Will’s fierce cries.

Salt and heat filled his senses, his nose buried in the modest curls at the base of Will’s sex, swallowing him down until his mate’s cries grew thready and pleading. He gave him one last suck, sliding his lips off of Will’s pounding flesh to tip his head up, his arousal sharpening painfully when he found Will staring down at him, flushed and sheened in sweat.

“I love you, Will,” he breathed, his eyes upturned as he pressed a kiss to Will’s slick belly. “Always and forever.”

Will drew a shaking breath, hardly able to speak with the echoes of that climax still rushing through his trembling body. He loosened his hold on Hannibal’s hair and murmured with an exhausted smile, “I love you, too, Hannibal.”
It was too much for Hannibal to bear even still, Will’s tender reciprocation breaking the last hold on his restraint. He tugged Will around and pulled him down to sit sideways across his thighs, the piano bench pushing back over the floor in a groan of old wood on wood. Will groped for balance and hit the keys with a surprised laugh, the piano making a discordant racket that sounded twice more as Hannibal wrangled Will into his lap.

“You undo me all at once,” he purred, groaning when Will’s perfectly round backside settled firmly over the straining bulk of his groin. He fought the constriction of Will’s pants where they hung up on his thighs, fumbling as if he’d never encountered a pair of breeches in his life. “Damn all this clothing! From now on you are wearing skirts!”

“I won’t,” Will said, his breath escaping on a gasp when one of Hannibal’s large, capable hands slid down to cup his backside, fingers delving up between his thighs to find him warm and wet and waiting, excited by his passion. “I said I would never tell you to stop, Hannibal. I never said I would make it easy for you.”

Hannibal hushed him with a kiss, his free hand drifting up Will’s bared midriff to splay over his chest, finding and teasing one swollen nipple to make Will wriggle and moan.

“You don’t fancy the idea of it?” he asked, trying to touch Will everywhere at once, reduced to an adolescent with sheer trembling excitement. “Imagine how much easier this would be if you wore a dress.”

“I do not dress to suit or entice you,” Will reminded him around his demanding kisses, back arching hard when Hannibal tweaked his nipple and tugged, arousal pooling in his gut. A startled, gasped sob escaped him when Hannibal’s warm hand dropped to brush over his spent sex. The rasp of his palm against Will’s sensitive head made his teeth clench, his hips tightening in a brief, helpless arch. “Ah! You need no more encouragement than you have just now, Lord Clarges!”

“If you so much as breathe, I’m encouraged, Will!” Hannibal said. “It is not my fault that you are entirely enticing! I cannot be held responsible for that!”

Will shuddered in his arms, wiggling so delightfully against his swollen erection. The scent of his need was thick and luscious, mouth-watering enough that Hannibal entertained the notion of hefting him back up onto the piano keys to plunge his tongue up inside of him.

“I used to be so nervous of doing this. I fretted about it in the weeks before we were married,” Will panted, one hand clenching on Hannibal’s shoulder, his free hand running into Hannibal’s open clothing to feel his hot skin, the crisp hair over his chest, the play of muscle beneath his palm. “I had no idea what to expect. I never thought it would be so…”

“Amazing?” Hannibal asked, dragging his pants down further to bare Will’s corded, firm thighs. It was impossible to see the marble-perfect curve of his leg and not cup it, fingers sliding between Will’s thighs to sweep his skin in a firm caress. “Transcending? Life-altering?”

“Rushed,” Will breathed, his lips curving into a smile against Hannibal’s mouth.

Hannibal paused for a moment, then easily hitched Will up against him and seated the tip of his wide, ready sex into the tight clutch of Will’s body.

“You unmake me entirely,” Hannibal said, the words moaned against Will’s throat as he eased him down, sinking to the hilt inside of Will’s wet, hot body. “I intend to kiss you and treasure you and instead I end up fumbling your clothes off like an untried boy! You make me forget everything in my haste. This is altogether your fault.”

Will gasped, half laughter, one hand landing on the keys in another jarring chime of as he steadied himself, eyes closed and skin pulling taut with the sensation of Hannibal buried fully within him. His knot was firm and demanding as it slid inside of him, sending a river of goose-flesh up Will’s back. He went liquid with delight around Hannibal, letting his full weight rest in the cup of Hannibal’s groin, gasping as his husband’s hands swept up his taut sides.

“I n-never said,” he managed, rocking in Hannibal’s lap with growing force. “I never said it was a bad thing.”

“Gods, Will,” Hannibal breathed, wrapping his arms tight around his vigorously moving mate, each tiny movement sending a shock wave of pleasure through him. He tried to hold back, to hold still, to let Will take what he wanted, but he couldn’t resist the tight squeeze of Will’s body around him, couldn’t resist the scent of him, the feel of him, the special touch that was uniquely his mate and could never be imitated or mistaken. He buried his mouth against Will’s throat and arched up into him, a slight, rolling thrust that brought a sharp, keening cry from Will’s mouth. “Every time I try to restrain myself, you... happen.”
Will laughed again, soft and breathless and writhing in his lap, a weighty pressure on his swollen knot that seared them both with pleasure. “Like a pebble tossed in a river?”

“More like a boulder rolling down a mountainside,” Hannibal moaned, laving Will’s long throat with his hot tongue. He shifted him around, tipping Will forward over the piano. Will splayed his arms wide to withstand the deep, steady arch of Hannibal’s hips, fingers clenched on wood and ivory alike, his husband coiling over him to put the full force of his strong back into every deep, rolling thrust.

Will shuddered, hips working in time against the push and arch of Hannibal’s body, helpless against the ecstasy that swelled so rapidly with every touch of those long-fingered hands on his flesh. Hannibal’s knot pressed against him, a sharp shock of sensation against his tight sac, an almost painful plunge of thickening flesh pushing deep and pulling free again. Will fought the restriction of the pants caught around his knees, needing to spread his legs wider, to open himself up for it, hungry to be stuffed full of his mate and tied fast, to feel the painful sweetness of Hannibal so deep inside of him.

“I love you so much, Will,” Hannibal breathlessly said, sweeping one hand up Will’s body, cupping the slight fullness of his chest, marveling at how perfectly shaped and supple he was. He felt the milking contractions start, gaining force as Will was brought closer to orgasm, and he cursed softly, his own peak threatening to unmake him. “I am only ever whole when I am with you.”

“Hannibal,” Will moaned, and uttered a noise that made Hannibal snarl in response, straining hard against his mate’s pliant body, his knot pushing past the rim of Will’s tight passage one last time to be promptly caught. The sensitive head of his sex was drawn up into the exquisite constriction of muscles deep inside, a clench and squeeze and pull in a ripple of hot flesh. It brought his knot to aching fullness, sudden and startling and so painfully pleasurable that he couldn’t control the throaty, deep purr that escaped him.

“I always feel as if I’m coming apart,” Will whispered, rocking softly to feel the pressure and pulse of Hannibal’s fat knot testing the confines of his body. “How can it always be this way?”

Hannibal hunkered over him, one arm wrapped beneath him to grip his shoulder, his other hand falling to milk Will’s half-hard body in time with his own, those contractions growing stronger with every throb and buck of his heavy sex and fat knot seated in his mate’s welcoming body.

Will uttered a throaty cry, a soft call that Hannibal answered with another deep, rumbling chuff and more pressure on the slick sex in his hand. Somehow, gloved tightly in Will’s body with his knot firmly anchored, the short, rocking arch of their bodies together managed to be even more piercingly pleasurable than thrusting with abandon into his deep, giving body.


They came as one, tied into a single creature, knit together in pleasure, a shivering mess of flesh and gasping breaths and frantic, wet kisses at impossible angles only allowed by Will’s limber grace.

“I love you, Hannibal,” Will whispered, gasping it as Hannibal sucked at his mouth, at his tongue, bit gently at his chin and throat. “You can never know how much...”

Hannibal’s wet hand lifted from Will’s softening sex to tenderly rub his heaving belly and Will relaxed with a soft sigh, head dropping, his hands braced on the piano to balance himself and bear up beneath Hannibal’s weight. He held himself gingersly, tentative to press too heavily into Hannibal’s groin now that the hardest flush of orgasm had passed. He could feel another deep, internal one looming, that slow, drawn out sensation of climax stretched into a pleasure that just kept going. There were places within him he never dreamed could make him feel so good, places that just the pressure of Hannibal’s taut knot and thick sex stimulated relentlessly, Nature’s compensation for the inconvenience of long knotting.

“I love you, too, Will,” Hannibal whispered, teeth catching on Will’s earlobe, his hand sliding over Will’s on the piano keys to touch the ring on his finger. “And no matter what you may feel from your bond, be certain it’s hardly the half of it.”

Will shivered at his words, gasping a little and going liquid with relief as another climax washed over him. Hannibal’s arms closed around him and tipped him back against his chest where Will’s head lolled against his shoulder, a soft sigh of content delight overcoming him.

+ “If you feel half as good right now as I do,” Hannibal whispered to him, nudging him enough to be able to lay a kiss on his sweaty cheek, “then you must feel very good, indeed.”
“I feel... whole,” Will murmured, naming the feeling that the bond gave him, the completion he felt being connected to his husband so much deeper than the skin. He squirmed slightly on him, a firm contraction in his body gripping Hannibal hard enough to wring a deep groan from them both.

Deep satisfaction suffused Hannibal to hear such wonderful words from his mate. Little by little, he was bringing his mate around to the truth—they were a family, stronger together than apart, matched in every way that would keep them enthralled for the rest of their lives. Whole was only the start of it, Hannibal dearly hoped.

“Even if it was rather fast,” Will whispered, a smirk teasing his lips.

Hannibal chuckled, sighing softly as his seed began to seep from Will’s tight body, wetting them both. “You do tend to happen rather often, Will.”

“Oh, don’t lay this at my doorstep, Lord Clarges,” Will said, wiggling against him, one hand lifting to absently caress Hannibal’s cheek. “Every time I’m in your presence, you begin peeling me out of my clothing.”

“You are too enticing.”

“Enticing? With my monk’s wardrobe and spectacles,” Will said, laughing a little. “I cannot imagine what could inspire you so often with such vigorous application of intent.”

“I think perhaps it might be the fit of your coat. It is quite obscene, the way it clings to your waist,” Hannibal breathed into his ear, grinning. “Perhaps it is your mournful singing? Though I do at times blame the silverware.”

Will laughed again at that, a raspy and unfettered sound that Hannibal found delightful.

“Honestly,” he said, subsiding in Hannibal’s arms. “You are perverse.”

“Well, considering the depths of my moral decrepitude, you shall soon be just as perverse,” Hannibal said, shivering slightly at the sensation of Will clenching as he shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position in Hannibal’s lap. “Or so I hope.”

Will rubbed his cheek again, an absent-minded stroke of gentle fingers over his smooth jaw. The gentle, soft way that Hannibal rubbed his stomach soothed him, easing away the inevitable ache that followed such wracking fulfillment. Hannibal’s knot began to ease, but he stayed there inside of him, thick and giving though less firm.

“Our guests will be up soon,” Hannibal murmured, nuzzling Will’s curls and nipping his ear.

“I can’t see them in this state, you’ve made me all untidy,” Will said, closing his eyes and sighing with contentment.

“Though your enthusiasm for distracting me does you credit, Lord Clarges.”

“I could always take you back to bed,” Hannibal suggested, squeezing him close, “and distract you some more. Perhaps I could take my time with you, if you don’t flash your garters my way.”

“We’d never get out again, with your appetites,” Will laughed. “No, just... just stay like this for a little longer, Hannibal.”

“As you are my husband, I will do as you say,” Hannibal said, shifting his mate in his embrace, gathering him close to cradle him and kiss him. He rubbed Will’s belly, sliding his fingers into the slight wisping of hair around his groin and back up to the dimple of his belly button. The slight roughness of his palm was pleasant, lifting the fine hairs on Will’s nape and awakening a low, pleased purr in his long throat. Hannibal burrowed against him, sighing, “Your scent has changed since Marsham Heath. Every time I catch it, my mouth waters as if I could eat you.”

“I haven’t been using the scent blockers or suppressants,” Will murmured, utterly relaxed in Hannibal’s embrace, safe in his mate’s protective arms. “Maybe this is finally my true scent?”

Hannibal considered carefully, but finally ventured, “I noticed you didn’t eat very well last night, either. The scents seemed to put you off. Has your sense of smell changed recently, Will?”

“It has,” Will said, snuggling against him. “I had no idea the medicines I took would have such an effect on me. I’ve never noticed things smelling so strongly before I stopped taking them. I hope it will settle out soon.”

“Yes, that could be the reason,” Hannibal said, marking the logic of Will’s statement but he was disappointed nonetheless. He almost admitted to hoping for a pregnancy, but he held his tongue. The last thing he wanted to do was put pressure on Will in the matter of a child. After all, they had the rest of their lives, just as his mate had said. “Should I order breakfast to your sitting room for us when we go down? You must be starving after barely picking at your food last night.”

“I was too anxious to eat well,” Will said, half asleep and satiated. “I could only manage some coffee and toast this morning and it didn’t go far.”
“Then it’s settled,” Hannibal whispered, kissing Will’s cheek and hitching him up a tad higher in his lap. “We’ll have some breakfast, and then I will take you to bed, but only to tuck you in. You seem to be in dire need of a nap.”

“What can I say?” Will asked, grinning. “Your moral decrepitude has quite exhausted me.”

Winston suddenly woofed about the time Hannibal heard a creak past the archway. Will tensed in his arms and Hannibal sharply said, “If you don’t wish to be dismissed without a reference, you’ll stop where you are.”

“No, I don’t want that, m’Lord,” Berger said, his voice sounding from a distance. “Mr. Buddish has arrived in something of a state, and I thought you’d want to know. He needs to see you straightaway, m’Lord. Trust me, I’d never interrupt your having some practice otherwise.”

“Practice?” Hannibal snarled, and Will stifled a laugh, more amused than mortified.

“Piano, my Lord?” Berger said, uncertain. “One of the girls said she heard someone playing.”

Hannibal frowned, not entirely sure he believed him, but said all the same, “We’ll be down momentarily.”

“Very good, m’Lord,” Berger said, and added with hesitance, “Is there anything I could get you—”

“Your absence is a good start, Mr. Berger, thank you,” Hannibal told him, then amended it with, “and breakfast for two in Will’s sitting room. Have it brought up after we’ve settled Mr. Buddish.”

“Certainly, my Lord!” Berger said, the floorboards creaking on his exit.

“Ever the tactful one, your Mr. Berger,” Will said, shoulders shaking with low laughter, his voice pitched to a whisper. “You’re very at ease with our near escape,” Hannibal pointed out. He grasped Will’s slender waist and urged him up, sliding out of his body with a wince of over-stimulation.

“He couldn’t see an inch of me around you,” Will said, his booted feet touching the floor to steady himself. He scooted sideways, groping with one hand to drag his pants up, and said with a smirk, “Though I’m sure he still got an eyeful, Lord Clarges.”

“No more of an eyeful than he gets every time I dress,” Hannibal chuckled, sliding to his feet to pull his pants up. “Mr. Buddish is here very early.”

“I hope there is no emergency,” Will mused, holding still when Hannibal turned to him and began to right his clothing with the same efficiency he’d shown in undoing it.

“We’ll soon find out,” Hannibal said, adding with a frown, “You’re missing some buttons, Will.”

“Oh, I do wonder why,” he teased, reaching up to fasten the buttons on Hannibal’s shirt, rubbing his fingertips through the hair on Hannibal’s chest one final time before it was hidden away beneath propriety. “Don’t worry about it, I’ll need to change anyway. I can already feel your exhaustive efforts on my behalf making themselves known. It isn’t fair being left with all the mess.”

Hannibal sniffed, angling a look down his nose at Will as he finished dressing him.

“Am I wrong?” Will asked, tugging his husband close to give his lower lip a playful nip, his blue eyes dancing with amusement. “Or do you feel you’re left with something more troublesome?”

“Of course I am,” Hannibal told him, looping his arms around Will’s waist to pull him close, standing pressed belly to belly and almost eye to eye. “I’m left with the torture of knowing that beneath your prim exterior lays a passionate, loving, exciting siren who inspires my libido if you so much as touch a spoon to your lips.”

Will grinned, lifting his hand to Hannibal’s nape to squeeze the firm muscle there, enjoying these last few moments of privacy before life made demands on them once more.

“Trust me, my beautiful wolf,” Hannibal purred, placing a soft, teasing kiss on Will’s full lips, “there is nothing so troublesome in the world as badly-timed appreciation for an Alpha male.”

Will sighed against his lips, his moan half enjoyment and half reluctance. He tipped his head and pressed his nose beneath Hannibal’s jaw, drawing a heavy breath of his thick scent before saying, “When that happens, just let me know, and I’ll be sure to mention Aunt M—”

“Will!”
Despite Hannibal’s assistance in the matter, they were cleaned up, properly dressed in fresh clothing, and heading downstairs in record time.

“My Lords! Beg your pardon, my Lords!” Mrs. Henderson called, hurrying up behind them somewhat out of breath. Will and Hannibal both paused as one, concerned by her agitation, and she said, “I am so sorry to shout after you, my Lords, only there’s a woman from the Capital downstairs.”

“Downstairs?” Hannibal echoed, frowning.

“Yes, my Lord,” Mrs. Henderson said, nodding. “She said she was here to see you, my Lord.”

“Me? Heavens, we’re needed on all fronts,” Will said, brow furrowing in thought. “Why did she come to the back?”

“She didn’t say, m’Lord,” Mrs. Henderson said, moving when they headed back towards the front. “Shall I have her wait in the servants’ hall for you?”

“No, Mrs. Henderson, show her to the study, please,” Will said, striding briskly along next to Hannibal, “and give her some tea while she waits. I’ll be along momentarily. And could you have one of the footmen take Winston out? He seems very agitated and could use a run.”

“Yes, my Lord!” Mrs. Henderson said, catching Winston by his collar and heading back the way they’d come.

“I certainly hope grandfather is still asleep,” Hannibal said beneath his breath, hearing a commotion at the front door that hurried his step.

“Not for long,” Will said, seeing Mr. Hawkes at the door like a sentinel.

“Hawkes, what on earth? Why haven’t you let Mr. Buddish in?” Hannibal scolded, pausing as the stately butler opened the door.

“Because he is not alone, my Lords,” Mr. Hawkes explained, swinging the massive panel open on one very flushed, very agitated, and somewhat worried Mr. Buddish standing in the drive with two of the largest dogs Will had ever seen in his life. “Good gods!” Hannibal said, startling the weary solicitor into turning around.

The dogs nearly pulled Mr. Buddish off of his feet in a sudden lunge for the lane. They strained against their chains with such force that both Will and Hannibal moved to assist him, dragging backwards against the dogs with all their combined strength.

“I beg your pardon, my Lords!” Mr. Buddish said, huffing and puffing with effort. “The coach only took us as far as the lane! They’ve been inconvenient to an unimaginable degree!”

“What in heaven’s name are you doing with Mr. Tier’s dogs?” Hannibal asked, ending with a frustrated, booming, “Sit!”

The massive, raw-boned dogs immediately sat down, their chains going slack.

Panting from their brief struggle, Will asked, “What did you say to them?”

“I told them to sit!” Hannibal said, swiping at his brow. “Tier gave them orders in his mother’s native tongue so no one else could command them. She was from Lietuva, as my mother was. It was a commonality we shared as he convalesced in my care.”

“Oh, thank you, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, nearly doubling over with relief, his leather case dangling from one trembling hand. “I’m nearly done in! Gods above, they are strong.”

Will moved with caution to inspect the beast sitting nearest to him. Bright, intelligent dark eyes turned up to his, and there was no malice in it whatsoever when he reached out slowly to touch its warm head. “What a magnificent animal.”

“Magnificently dangerous,” Hannibal corrected, moving Will’s hand out of snapping range with a grim frown. “But why do you have them, Mr. Buddish? Tier never lets them out of his sight.”

“Mr. Tier is no longer with us, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, still struggling to catch his breath. “The dogs arrived at Marsham Heath dragging his body behind them, according to Magistrate Crawford. He sent for me yesterday, hoping I would know something of the situation. I was able to identify him, though it was a sorry sight to behold. They must’ve pulled him for miles.”


“No, my Lord, his throat was slit, as far as Magistrate Crawford could tell,” Mr. Buddish said, composing himself enough to straighten, his livid flush dying down. “He said there were other wounds, but Mr. Tier’s neck was cut ear to ear. There must have been one nightmare of a fight, but he lost it.”
Will and Hannibal exchanged an uneasy look, recalling two guards who’d gone in a similar fashion, their throats cut ear to ear and their bodies dumped in the river.

“Yet the dogs aren’t hurt?” Will noted, looking them over with scrutiny. “And the chains aren’t bloodied.”

“He was caught in a fight without his girls,” Hannibal agreed. “And whoever cut his throat fastened the chains back in place. How odd.”

“Or merely last respects to a worthy opponent,” Will mused, reaching out to stroke his hand down the dog’s back, admiring her sleek hide. “But why did they drag him to Marsham Heath?”

“Tier always marked a place for them before setting out, should anything happen to him,” Hannibal quietly said, rubbing his hand over his face, the faintest threads of grief making themselves known. “He must’ve marked Marsham Heath as that was his last stop. His girls would move through fire and brimstone to reach it, in the event he was insensible. I highly doubt he meant to be attached to them when they did so, however. What a ghastly sight that must have been! How on earth did no one stop them before they got so far?”

“They frightened the life out of everyone who saw them, my Lord. It took twelve strong people to restrain them in order to release Mr. Tier’s body, according to Magistrate Crawford,” Mr. Buddish told them, blotting his forehead with his handkerchief and casting a wary look at the still, silent dogs. “Once the chains were unhooked, they stopped fighting us. Magistrate Crawford asked me if you wanted them destroyed, but I took responsibility for them. I know how much you admired Mr. Tier’s animals and I thought perhaps you might wish to care for them in his memory. There is precious little else left. He had no possessions that I know of.”

“You did the right thing, Mr. Buddish,” Will said, his voice firm. He stooped and began to lightly stroke both of the dogs on their massive heads. “Of course we’ll take care of them. Poor things must be lost without him. But are there any leads into his death?”

“None, m’Lord,” Mr. Buddish admitted. “I assumed he was on House business.”

“Yes, he was tracking Mason Verger,” Hannibal said, glowering at even the mention of the man he so despised.

“I took the liberty of doubling the guard on Chelsea House, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said with an uncertain flick of his eyes at Will, who was absorbed in petting the silent, stiff dogs. “And Miss Bloom’s family has sent men to escort them, when they are ready to leave.”

“That is a relief,” Will said, looking up at Mr. Buddish, his somber face pale in the late morning light. “But surely Mason Verger could not have bested Mr. Tier?”

“Not even well-armed and well-warned,” Hannibal said, shaking his head. “No, someone else got to him. Someone who has a vested interest in Mason not being turned into dog food.”

Mr. Buddish frowned, at a loss, but Will only said, “I’ve sent men off to find Francis. I’ll contact the agency to see if they’ve checked in.”

A shiver of foreboding swept Hannibal’s spine and he nodded, grim. “What of Tier’s body?”

“I had the undertaker in Moseley see to him, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, tugging at his disheveled clothing with a sudden, embarrassed realization of the state he was in. “There will be a modest marker with his name and the date of his death. I paid for it from your spending account, but I can adj—”

“No, Mr. Buddish, that is perfectly fine,” Hannibal assured him. “Mr. Tier has no family to inform and no one who knows him save for ourselves. I can do no less for him, for the service he has done me.”

“It seems very sad to be so alone in the world,” Will murmured, wishing he’d had a chance to meet Mr. Tier. The sense-memory of faint Alpha scent returned to him but he had nothing to put it to.

“Tier had his girls, and he was happiest roaming the world with them,” Hannibal said, thoughtful. “We’ll take good care of them in his place.”

He took the chains from Mr. Buddish and held them in one strong hand, shortening the length to draw up the slack, saying to Will, “You should go and see to your guest. I’ll settle the girls with Peter and join you in a moment, if you wouldn’t mind the company?”
“I never mind your company, Lord Clarges,” Will said, straightening with a final pat, wishing he could accompany them down to the stables. “Tell Peter I haven’t forgotten about Athena and her puppies. Perhaps we can walk down later and check on them all?”

“I’m sure we can arrange it,” Hannibal said, clucking his tongue, pleased when the girls immediately stood, alert and attentive. “Mr. Buddish, thank you for the effort you’ve taken. I appreciate it greatly, and I know Mr. Tier will rest easier knowing his darlings are in trusted hands.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, smiling despite his weariness.

Will graced him with a warm, beautiful smile and said, “Mr. Buddish, shall we get you settled?”

“Thank you,” Mr. Buddish said, falling into step next to Will as Hannibal led the dogs down towards the stables. “This is a sorry, awful business, but it isn’t the only reason I’ve come. Hobbs is scheduled for execution; it hasn’t been made public, but I knew his Lordship would wish to know.”

“Yes, thank you,” Will said, blanching with dismay. “Miss Hobbs shouldn’t be alone when that happens. At least she won’t see it.”

“She will,” Mr. Buddish said, pausing on the stoop, Will pausing next to him. “She wants to watch him drop. The Lord Chancellor tried to convince her to leave the Capital beforehand, but she insists. And... and she doesn’t want either of you to come.”

“I beg your pardon?” Will said, taken aback.

“She said it would undo all the good that’s been managed so far, and she won’t have it,” Mr. Buddish said, shaking his head. “The Lord Chancellor is arranging it for her. No one will see her or know who she is. He will personally accompany her on the day.”

“Hannibal isn’t going to like this,” Will told him, grim. "Nor do I.”

“It’s her wish, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said with a helpless shrug, starting when Mr. Hawkes swung the door open for them. “I am sorry.”

“It certainly isn’t your fault,” Will said, pausing in the foyer as Mr. Hawkes divested Mr. Buddish of his coat, hat, and gloves. “Mr. Hawkes, if you could arrange a room for Mr. Buddish and take a tray up for him, I would greatly appreciate it. He’s had an exhausting journey and needs some rest.”

“Yes, my Lord. And your bags, Mr. Buddish?”

“The coachman dropped them at the head of the lane, Mr. Hawkes,” Mr. Buddish said, dragging his case around in front of him to pat it. “All of the important things are here.”

“Thank you, Mr. Buddish,” Will said. “Mr. Hawkes, I leave our guest in your care.”

“Very good, my Lord.”

Will strode off while Mr. Hawkes sent Mr. Buddish upstairs with a footman and dispatched someone to collect his trunk. One of their new hires was waiting at the study door at perfect attention, stiff and formal enough to coax a smile to Will’s lips.

“Has our guest’s tea arrived?” Will asked, pausing before the door.

“It has, my Lord,” the footman said, and jolted into motion to open the door for him.

A very slender, tall woman rose to her feet from the settee as Will entered, a packet held against her waist. She was poised, her dark eyes full of curiosity, but she smiled when he said, “Good morning. I’m afraid I wasn’t expecting you.”

She bypassed the offer to provide her name by saying, “I was sent to deliver a translation, Lord Clarges.”

He found the slow, careful cadence of her voice to be pleasant and soft, if only a little unusual to his country-trained ears.

“The journal?” he said, understanding washing over him. “I wasn’t expecting it so soon! Were you able to complete it?”

He couldn’t restrain his excitement. He moved closer to join her, noting the journal was tucked into the flap of the packet. He checked his approach when he saw the way her thumb brushed over the cover as if she was anxious for its safety.

“You were able to complete it?” he inquired, stopping where he stood to reassess her, taking in the details of her features and finding strain there, concern, and a greater age than his first impression had told him of.

“I was,” she said, her smile slight as she read him, in turn. “You were not the Lord Clarges I was expecting.”

“I apologize for any confusion,” Will said, smiling to reassure her. “I was the one who asked for the translation. My husband gave me leave to do so, if that is a worry?”
“No,” she said, shaking her head in slight negative. “It is not.”

The door swung open suddenly and Hannibal spilled through in a rush, saying, “Please forgive my intrusion, I was just—
Chiyoh?”

Will’s eyes widened with surprise, sliding from his mate back to the woman before him, but she only smiled and said, “Hello, Hannibal.”

Chapter 49

‘What is this one, Hannibal?’

Something was thrust in his face, prickly leaves tickling his nose, and Hannibal snuffled, filling his lungs with the scent of fresh-cut herbs.

‘Rosemary!’ he cried, eyes flying open to find her crying. ‘Chiyoh?’

Someone called her name, sharp and impatient, an adult with urgent business who had no time for childish needs.

‘I have to go away,’ she told him, another tear rolling down her smooth face. ‘He’s sending me away...’

She flung her arms around him in a brief, short hug—bony arms, a crush of sweet floral scent, the herbal aroma of her heavy dark hair—and suddenly she was gone. Her long braid streamed out behind her, her skirts kicking up around her stick-thin calves, her bare feet black on the bottoms from the garden’s rich, deep earth.

‘Chiyoh!’ Hannibal cried, giving chase but unable to keep up with her, a clumsy fawn behind a nimble doe. ‘Chiyoh! Come back!’

She looked back over her shoulder but she didn’t slow, her dark eyes full of loss as she raced through the gardens of Galley Field, heeding that impatient voice.

‘Chiyoh! Come back...’

The little girl he once had known stood before him as a grown woman, composed and still, but smiling. Her age didn’t show on her as his own did, he saw. She looked no older than Will, though she was older than Hannibal himself. Yet he could see the echoes of the child who had played games with him in the garden, recognizing what he had once forgotten, her face rising up through the veil of his past to tease him with formless memories.

“Hannibal?” Will softly questioned, moving to his side to grasp his hand. The strange, bittersweet sadness he felt through his bond bewildered him as much as Hannibal’s recognition of the stranger before them. Chiyoh, he’d called her, as if she’d once been an intimate acquaintance of his. But why on earth would an intimate acquaintance come in through the servants’ entrance?

“Pardon me for surprising you,” Chiyoh said, her voice measured and even. “It has been a very long time, I know.”

“Gods,” Hannibal breathed, his fingers clenching on Will’s, his amber eyes widening with disbelief even as a smile curled the corners of his lips. “Is it really you?”

She dipped her head in a nod, her own smile slight but genuine.

“Hannibal?” Will said again, and his mate shook himself, drawing Will’s hand to his lips for a quick, soothing kiss.

“Forgive me, Will,” Hannibal said, drawing a shaky breath. “This is Chiyoh. I knew her when I was a child at Galley Field. She lived with us there when I was very young.”

He gazed at her with a softness in his eyes that was more and more at home there.

“How long has it been?” Hannibal asked, his thumb moving over Will’s fingers, smoothing his soft skin. “Thirty years?”

“Thirty-one,” she answered, still as a statue as if awaiting something, some reaction or word that would somehow mend a separation that spanned decades.

“You both must have been very young,” Will said, surprised. Despite his earlier teasing, it struck him suddenly how much distance there was between himself and Hannibal in their ages. Thirty years ago Hannibal had known this woman as a child, while Will hadn’t even been hoped for yet.

Will’s good breeding took over in his moment of confoundment and he tugged Hannibal towards the settee, urging, “Shall we sit?”
“Yes, of course, where are my manners,” Hannibal said, the words a breathless rush, offered with a smile. “Chiyoh, this is my mate, Will.”

“We’ve met,” Chiyoh said, sliding gracefully to sit with the packet in her lap.

“She’s come with the journal translation,” Will said, settling at Hannibal’s side, uncertain what to make of her reserve. When his husband merely shook his head, Will reminded him, “Lady Murasaki’s journal.”

“Gods, I’d nearly forgotten,” Hannibal breathed, dread casting a pall over the pleasure he’d first felt. “How on earth did you get involved?”

Chiyoh spread her long fingers over the package in her lap, smoothing the edges, and said, “Some time ago her journal was brought to our community to be translated. The man who began the translation recognized the mentions of me and asked if I would finish it in his place.”

“Her journal,” Hannibal murmured, fingers still tightly entwined with Will’s. “Of course you would be mentioned.”

“And you’re here to deliver it?” Will asked, eyeing the package with curiosity.

“Yes,” she said, her mouth pursing in a soft frown. “When I was told who it was for, I decided I would bring it in person.”

Her dark eyes sought Hannibal’s and held them, a soft plea in their depths.

“I know you have forgotten me,” she said. “But I have never forgotten you, Hannibal. I wished to see you again. I wished to make certain that her story is safe in your hands.”

Hannibal swallowed hard, oddly moved by her request, wondering how he could have forgotten so much about his childhood and the people who had been a part of it.

“I know my husband’s relationship with Lady Murasaki was not all it could be,” Will gently reassured her, “but it will be in good hands. I think there is a great deal that has been lost with time where she is concerned, and we could all benefit greatly to know it once more.”

Chiyoh’s eyes flicked to Will’s, quietly assessing, measuring, but not malicious or unkind, only cautious.

“Yes,” she said, smoothing her palm over the packet. “There is a great deal that has been lost. It is very important to me that she is remembered well, Hannibal. She died in a place far from her home and she is buried in the earth surrounded by those who did not love her. I could do nothing to ease her burden while she lived, but this I can do. This I can do. And perhaps the debt I owe her can finally be paid.”

“Debt?” Hannibal asked, curious despite himself, his heart giving a strange little lurch when he thought of the Omega who had raised him, the pain half resentment, half heartbreak.

“I was orphaned in war, the only survivor of our compound, the child of a serving girl,” Chiyoh slowly said, her careful words slow and considered, not a single syllable wasted. “Lady Murasaki was a soldier, the warlord after her father.”

“An Omegan warlord?” Will asked, fascinated.

“It is the custom in Nippon,” Chiyoh said, and corrected herself with a small, sad smile, “It was the custom. The mingling of male and female is a sign of favor, lucky. Armies were always led by Omegan generals, and men always prayed for an Omegan child to leave their legacy to.”

“Not sons?” Hannibal asked, intrigued despite himself to hear her speak of things he had no knowledge of.

“If there were no Omegan children,” Chiyoh conceded, “but they were preferred. In the end, children are the only currency that lasts—what better investment than an heir who can both bear and sire them?”

“You said you were taken away as a child,” Will said, curious. “Did you learn this from her?”

“From Lady Murasaki, at first,” Chiyoh said. “Later, from the community where I grew up. There was a terrible war in our homeland and many of us fled. Lady Murasaki should have abandoned me to die, but she took me, instead. When the uprising left our world in ruins and foreigners came to claim our lands, she left everything behind to bring me with her.”

“She brought you to the Continent first, didn’t she?” Will asked, her words astonishing him, his vivid imagination seizing on the images she evoked and capturing his curiosity in a heartbeat.

“I don’t understand, Chiyoh,” Hannibal said, bewilderment wrinkling his brow. “How did you end up with the journal? Rather, how did you end up in the Capital in order to get the journal? Is that where they took you?”

“ Took her?” Will echoed, glancing from Hannibal to Chiyoh, whose dark eyes slid to her lap, hidden behind the fan of her lashes.
“My last—my only—memory of Chiyoh is of her telling me she had to leave,” Hannibal said, watching her carefully for any sign of emotion on her smooth face. "He's sending me away,’ you said.”

“Yes,” Chiyoh whispered, still looking at her hands in her lap. "I was sent away, apprenticed to a craftsman, hidden in a community of people from my homeland. It was a punishment, but not for me. He wanted to send me away from her. He wanted to send me home, but there was no home to be sent to…”

“So he shipped you off to the Capital? You couldn’t have been any older than Hannibal!” Will said. “Who would do such a terrible thing to a child?”

“My father,” Hannibal said, glowering. "It was him, wasn’t it? He’s the one who sent you off, packed away to the Capital to be forgotten among strangers?”

“Lady Murasaki wanted to leave him,” Chiyoh said, her lashes lifting to reveal deep sorrow in her glimmering brown eyes. "He made sure that she couldn’t.”

“My gods,” Will breathed, paling, stricken with horror. “He used you as a pawn to keep her at his side.”

“I always thought she had sent me away,” Chiyoh admitted, cradling the journal itself as if it was the most fragile, precious item in the world, “but now I know differently.”

She met Hannibal’s gaze, holding it with firm determination. “Now you will know differently, too.”

Hannibal said nothing for a long moment, his eyes closing in mingled dread and fear. But Will’s fingers moved in his, a light clasp of touch, and his warm, sweet scent filled Hannibal’s lungs, and he knew that he did have the strength to face whatever secrets that translation may hold. He might not have a year ago, pompous and willfully ignorant man that he’d been, but at Will’s side there was very little he found impossible, very little he lacked the bravery to face. The monster in that journal was nothing compared to the monster he’d faced in the mirror.

“Do you need a moment to speak in private?” Will quietly offered, attuned to his turmoil, less the bond and more his perceptive nature.

“No, please stay,” Hannibal said, fingers tightening on Will’s own. He opened his eyes and found Chiyoh watching him, silently reserved, ever watchful and still waiting for something he couldn’t fathom. “You heard how she died?”

“Yes,” she said, the barest flash of pain flitting across her face before fading away. “The man I was apprenticed to told me. He said she was buried here, and I cried when I heard it. As long as I knew her, Lady Murasaki only wanted to return home.”

“But there was no home to return to,” Will echoed, saddened.

“No. The world we knew was gone, the riches of her House stolen, the tenants of her lands murdered in their villages. Her heart longed for a place that no longer was and now her spirit is left to search for it,” Chiyoh whispered. She patted the packet, saying, "She can tell you for herself, if you wish to read it.”

“Of course I do,” Hannibal said, a slight shiver coursing through him as the ghostly fingers of his dreams came to rest on his shoulders. “Perhaps then I will understand why she could never love me, and why I hated her in return.”

Chiyoh’s brows slid down in a slight frown and she said, “She always loved you, Hannibal, but it was not allowed. So she tried to give you strength instead, in place of the love he denied you both.”

It took Will as much by surprise as it took Hannibal. They sat before her in stunned silence, eyes wide and unblinking, their laced fingers tightening in response.

Chiyoh grasped the packet with both hands, contemplating a moment before she offered it to Will.

“Lady Murasaki used to say all sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story,” she told them, reluctantly committing the packet to his hands. “This story is all that remains of her life. It was rarely kind to her, and she was raised as warriors are raised—hard and harsh and impassive. Her life was spent in loss and regret, and like a wild beast she gnashed her teeth against the bars that held her. Do not to judge her too harshly. Pain makes monsters of us all.”

Will took the packet with grave reserve, settling it into his lap.

“You must stay with us,” Hannibal softly said, wrapping his fingers over Will’s knee, needing to keep contact with him, the touch grounding him in Will’s strength.

“I cannot stay in this house,” Chiyoh said, her smile sad but tender. “Your grandfather would dislike it. I would remind him of too much he would rather forget, or has already forgotten. I will return to the Capital tonight.”
“Must you?” Hannibal asked, loosing a low, embarrassed laugh, unable to meet her gaze. “So many years since we’ve seen one another, and you will vanish again?”

“I have always been where you can find me, Hannibal,” Chiyoh told him, no trace of condemnation in her voice, only affection, “when you are ready to find me. Until then, I am content where I am.”

“Please, if we cannot prevail upon you to stay here at the House,” Will said, the packet heavy in his hands, the dusty scent of the journal rising up to his sensitive nose, “might we persuade you to stay in Hartford Town? I have your translation fee as well as the box I was given for surety. I can have it brought to you there.”

She considered it, her reluctance obvious, but Will saw beneath the surface. She doubted her welcome, was uncertain of how much she could depend on with the parting they’d had and the past they shared.

“There must be so much for the two of you to reminisce about,” Will coaxed, hoping she would agree. “At least spend the night. We will cover the cost of your stay. Perhaps we might take you to visit her grave?”

Her brown eyes widened, a minuscule indication of how profoundly that offer moved her.

“Yes, you must stay,” Hannibal said, seizing on Will’s offer with both hands, determined that Chiyoh would not flee from him, not again. “We will visit her grave and speak of our lives at Galley Field. Please, Chiyoh.”

“I will stay,” she said, strangely embarrassed to accept. “I will pay for it, however. I am not here to take advantage of you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal drew up, affronted by such a suggestion, and said, “Certainly you aren’t! I never dreamed such a thing! But you are here because of a task we set you, albeit unknowingly. You must allow us to compensate you and care for you as a guest, even if you refuse to stay here in the House.”

The taut, still surface of her expression rippled, the barest shimmer of relief showing beneath, all but swallowed by her poise. She rose, dipping her head in a slight nod at them both, and said, “Thank you, Hannibal, and thank you, Will. I will stay for a time in Town.”

Hannibal and Will shot to their feet the moment she stood, and Hannibal took her hand to give it a warm kiss, breathing, “It is very good to see you, Chiyoh.”

“I was not sure I would find welcome,” she said, her voice soft and low. “I watched you grow, but always from a distance, always holding my silence for fear that you would not know me should I speak. I am very glad to see you again, Hannibal.”

She pulled away and went to the door, going as silently as she’d come, leaving behind her the journal, the translation, and one very torn, unhappy Alpha.

Will ordered their private breakfast to the study instead of his sitting room, giving Hannibal time to gather himself. A quick check with Mr. Hawkes confirmed that a footman had accompanied Chiyoh down to Hartford Town and would see to the details on their behalf. He also graciously agreed not to mention their visitor to Grandfather, as Will wished to tell him with Hannibal.

He busied himself pouring coffee for them both before settling back down at Hannibal’s side, the packet resting between them with the journal atop it.

“I feel murky bits of memory rising up in the darkness of my mind,” Hannibal murmured, taking his coffee with a grateful smile. He sipped it, still unused to the strong flavor, and said, “They shimmer beneath the surface like shards of mirror in muddy waters, only catching the light by chance, only hinting at what lies beneath.”

“What do they hint at, Hannibal?” Will asked, quietly preparing a plate for each of them. He was relieved to find that there wasn’t a single strong-smelling food on the tray, though his hypersensitive nose found the sweet-tart aroma of rhubarb jam somewhat cloying. He pushed it to the far end of the tray and stuck to butter on his toast, a safe bet on any day.

“I remember her voice,” Hannibal said, turning his head just slightly to lift his amber eyes to Will’s. “Chiyoh’s voice. I remember her playing a guessing game with me in the garden. Rosemary, thyme, lemon balm—she taught me to recognize the things my nose told me, and envied my Alpha senses.”

“You were barely out of babyhood when she left,” Will murmured, urging his husband to eat. “It isn’t surprising you don’t remember much.”
“Taken,” Hannibal corrected, a world of unhappiness in that single word. “He took her away, Will. Rather, he had her sent away, all to keep Murasaki at his side... but why?”

“It must be here,” Will said, sliding his hands over the packet, his thumb brushing the plain cover of the journal itself. “Her reasons for staying, the things that happened to her. And, in turn, the things that happened to you.”

Hannibal flinched, dropping his gaze again, prompting Will to gently say, “You said yourself it was strange you could not remember, Hannibal. You must have seen a great deal more than you wished to or should have. I know it is frightening, and if you would rather not remember—”

“I need to remember,” Hannibal said, his abrupt words hushing any suggestion to the contrary. “I just... wish I didn’t have to.”

Will nodded, rubbing his hand down the curve of Hannibal’s back in a soothing stroke that pulled a soft, short-lived purr from Hannibal’s long throat.

“Everything I was as an adult, everything I believed as a youth,” Hannibal quietly said, head hanging when Will’s hand moved to his nape to squeeze and knead the tight muscles there, “it all was formed around her, the Lady Murasaki.”

“It’s unsettling, isn’t it?” Will murmured, his thoughts turning down the meandering trail of Hannibal’s responses. “Thinking that the person you were was based on a lie... But you aren’t that man anymore, Hannibal. You aren’t the child in her care, or the boy Chiyoh was taken from—you haven’t been that person for a very long time.”

“But I was,” Hannibal said, straightening to clasp Will’s hand, rubbing his heavy fangs against Will’s wrist to comfort himself, all interest in food forgotten. “I’m afraid I will find out I was wrong all these years, Will. That my hatred of her was... was as misplaced as my reaction to you when we first met.”

“If there is that possibility,” Will suggested, aware of Hannibal’s heartbeat slowing to match his own. He drew on the bond, finding the pain of uncertainty and worry and pulling it to him, drowning it in the contentment of being near to his mate and touched with love, “you will not be satisfied to remain ignorant of the truth, Hannibal. You have made your peace with me, with the past we’ve shared, with the pain you caused.”

Hannibal bit him, just a light clasp of heavy teeth against his skin, needing to satisfy the urge Will’s delicious scent inspired in him, wanting to calm himself with his mate’s tender affection.

“Don’t you think it’s time to make your peace with her?” Will asked, whispering the words to soften the impact he knew they would have.

Hannibal’s mouth froze on his skin for a split second before he pressed a kiss to Will’s wrist and lifted his head.

“It doesn’t mean forgiveness,” Will reminded him, lowering his hand to take up his cup again. “It doesn’t even mean understanding her. You see me for who I am. Can’t you give her the same chance? Whatever this journal says, the way she raised you influenced your understanding of the world. She damaged you, and knowing her intentions won’t change that. Even if you still despise her in the end, at least you will know the truth.”

Hannibal’s amber eyes met his and he nodded, his mouth pursing in a soft frown. He took the packet from Will’s lap and slid it out from beneath the journal. His hands were steady when he pulled the sheaf of papers free, his movements slow and careful.

“I thought there would be more,” he said, staring down at the sum of her, the lost Lady Murasaki. He offered the pages to Will, asking, “Will you read it to me? Not all of it, of course, just... you have such a pleasant voice. I think I could listen to anything, coming from you.”

Will’s mouth curved in a soft smile and he took the papers. Clearing his throat, he looked down at Chiyoh’s neat, tiny handwriting and began to read.

_I have forsaken myself. I am a warrior no longer. I have cast off the armor of my father and exchanged it for a prostitute’s robes. I must do what I can to survive. I have nothing. I own nothing. I belong nowhere and I can never go home... My family’s name is all that is left to remind me of who I am._

_I am Murasaki. I am Murasaki. I am Murasaki and will always be._

_In years past, I stepped over my father’s dead body and led an army into war against foreign invaders. I have watched my ancestral home burn to the ground, every living creature within murdered. I have buried my sons and sold my armor for_
food that was as dust in my mouth. I have lost a child, saved another, and flung myself on strange shores to escape the death
that waited patiently behind me.

Like a fox spirit, I have wrapped myself in the trappings of humanity. I am Omega, soft and delicate to their
condescending eyes. I pretend I do not hate them. I pretend I am weaker than they, and that is all they see. I have made a life
for us. I have done what I have had to do to protect Chiyoh.

Yet now I am afraid. Now I am afraid.

After all of these years, I have seen him again—the man who betrayed my father, the one who sat at our table and
deceived us. I have seen him in the face of his son.

I thought myself past anger. I thought myself past regret. Now I find I am merely a vessel for them.

I am Murasaki, and I will have my revenge. I know I will not survive it. I know that when the time comes, this terrible
rage will burn me to my soul, but he will burn alongside me, I will make sure of it.

And so I commit my life to these pages, from beginning to end. This is how I came to be so far from my home, passed like
a plaything from King to King, from stage to stage, from bed to bed, while my angry heart screamed inside of me. I am
Murasaki, and this is how I came to be.

Will read on while he and Hannibal ate their modest little breakfast, the childhood of Lady Murasaki laid out in short,
sharp sentences. There was a stark beauty in the way she wrote, all flourish stripped away for cold facts.

In a world of city-states and power plays, she was raised not as a daughter, nor as a son, but as an Omega—a trained,
hardened warrior, a gods-touched sliver of divinity on earth destined to command legions. She was still a child when the first
foreigners finally reached her home, secure in her place and confident in her father's ability to protect them. They thought they
had nothing to fear, and welcomed their guest into their hospitality despite his appalling manners and inability to speak with
any degree of propriety.

I was twelve years old that summer when he came, a tall and strange thing with eyes like a lion's. My father said he was
lucky, even if he was unbecoming of an Alpha male. He was soft and full of sadness and would watch the setting sun with
tears in his eyes. Father pressed him to stay the night, but he stayed with us for years.

The servants called him shishi to tease him, but Roland was his name.

"My gods!" Hannibal whispered, taking the page from Will. "Are you certain?"

"I can't imagine there was an error," Will said, leaning over to point to the place. "See? What are the chances, Hannibal?
Aunt Margaret said that Grandfather fled to Nippon after he fell out with Charles. Murasaki wrote that she was twelve when
this man came. Going by the dates on her gravestone, that would have been right around the time Grandfather was missing,
wouldn't it? We should ask him."

"Perhaps, but—"

Mr. Hawkes opened the door, then, announcing with sonorous dignity, "Your guests have begun to descend, my Lords,
should you like to join them."

"Thank you, Mr. Hawkes," Hannibal said, hastily stuffing the papers back into their packet. He smoothed his palms over
his knees in a nervous gesture Will had rarely seen him display, his agitation slicing up through the bond like ozone after a
lightning strike. He looked at Will and said, "We'll continue this later. Should I put that in my safe, or is there room enough in
that famous jewelry box of yours?"

"I'll put it away," Will promised, taking it from him and sliding to his feet in tandem with his husband, "and then I'll join
you with our guests."

"One crisis at a time," Hannibal said, still trembling with shock.

"Hannibal," Will called, pausing him before he could stride away. He closed the distance between them and reached up
with his free hand to cup his husband's high cheek.

Those golden eyes gazed down at him, the eyes of a lion, indeed, and some of his tension eased when Will placed a soft,
tender kiss on his lips.

"What was that for?" Hannibal whispered, his quivering tension running out of him, drained away by Will's kiss and the
gentle understanding in his mate's bright blue eyes.
“I love you, Hannibal,” Will told him, both answer and declaration. He kissed him again, pleased to feel his husband give slightly, relaxing to his touch. “I love you very much, and we will get to the bottom of this, I can promise you that.”

Hannibal smiled, clasping Will’s elbows in his hands for a light squeeze, and said, “Every time I hear you say that it’s as wonderful as it was the first time. Quickly, now—say it again?”

“I love you, Hannibal Lecter,” Will murmured, and sent him off with a parting kiss.

Will found Hannibal and their guests in the drawing room when he joined them after locking up the packet. His husband was with Uncle Robert and Lord Warrington, engaged in an animated conversation that showed a peek of the youth he’d once been. Will found himself watching his husband on his return, delighting in every quick grin and flash of Alpha fangs, every quip that passed his fine lips. Yet, he could taste Hannibal’s desperation for lightness after the odd revelations of the morning, his driving need for normalcy and enjoyment that had nearly been robbed from them both with even so little from Lady Murasaki’s journal. Will was glad it was locked up, and was determined it would stay that way until they had time to read the entirety.

“Will, honestly!” Mina said, her voice sharp with irritation. “You might as well be in the next room!”

“Don’t scold him,” Aunt Aldona said, a fond smile curving her lips. She patted Mina’s hand where they sat together, the other ladies in quiet conversation nearer the fireplace to chase away Aunt Margaret’s constant chill. “There is nothing wrong in being fascinated by one’s husband, is there?”

Will blushed and turned his head away, clearing his throat as he settled across from them. His senses were keyed to his mate, every husky purr of his voice, every shift of his powerful body, every soft curl of his scent that drifted across the room was a torment to his attention. The Omega in him wanted nothing more than to coax Hannibal someplace private, tug his husband into his arms, and cradle him until they both were calm and content. It was a difficult impulse to ignore, and he knew it tugged at Hannibal just as much, by the way his amber eyes kept seeking his.

Will’s attention focused very sharply, however, when Aunt Aldona said, “I was just admiring these. I noticed them in other rooms of the House and wondered for their use.”

Will looked at what she held, shock blanking his mind when she turned the frame in her graceful hands to show a display of his hand-tied lures.

“Where did you find those?” he asked, his voice thin, his eyes wide.

“Just here,” Aunt Aldona said, gesturing at the table next to her. A quick scan of the room showed Will several more frames placed on other surfaces, all of them holding his handiwork. “Will? You are very pale. Is something the matter?”

“He’s shocked, my Lady,” Mina said, sounding somewhat smug to Will’s ears. She took the framed lures from Aunt Aldona and made a show of placing them on the table between their seats. “I assure you, Will, I did everything in my power to dissuade Mr. Hawkes from putting these ghastly things out all over the house!”

“Ghastly?” Aunt Aldona echoed, muttering something beneath her breath. “They are not ghastly, but I confess I do not know what they are.”

Will recovered, irritation with Mina flushing his surprise away. He smiled at Aunt Aldona and said, “They are fishing lures. I craft them myself. Each one is unique, holding feathers and fibers from local wildlife.”

The small peak in his tension had drawn the assessing gaze of the other ladies, who drifted closer, half curious and half protective.

“You made these, Will?” Bedelia asked, picking up the frame to look before Aunt Grace plucked it from her hands, raising her monocle to peer at them. “I saw some on display in the parlor last night. I wondered who had made them.”

“Oh, Will makes all sorts of things,” Mina said, her smile fraying beneath the arrival of Bedelia, who made no move to hide her dislike. “I did try, Will. I promise you. I told Mr. Hawkes countless times that you would faint from mortification to have such things on display, that this is a private hobby of yours and you shouldn’t like anyone staring at it. I questioned him quite sharply on how he came to have them, even! But he insisted his Lordship wished them to be placed all about the House!”

“Did he, now?” Will asked, casting a dangerous look over his shoulder at Hannibal, who immediately straightened his back as if he’d been scolded and managed to look deceptively innocent.
“He did! I told him you wished nothing of the sort!” Mina carried on, nervously watching the frame make the rounds of their guests. “Who on earth would want to have such... common items on display in the rooms of such a rich House?”

“My husband, apparently,” Will said, a wry smile tugging his full lips as he thought of Hannibal sneaking his lures to Mr. Hawkes.

“I think they are quite beautiful, Lady Rathmore,” Lady Warrington said, accepting the frame as it was passed to her and taking a closer look. “Dressed so becomingly in feathers and fine thread, slender and enticing, and yet sharp enough to draw blood. You could start quite a Rage with these, Lord Clarges.”

“A rage?” Mina asked, uttering a delicate, floating little laugh. “For tying lures? Father always said—”

“I believe the only person interested in the opinion of Lord Reddig,” Aunt Margaret said with a sniff and a tap of her cane, “is no longer among us. And how was his departure, my dear?”

“Somewhat later than I would prefer, Aunt Margaret,” Will said, suppressing a smile when she winked at him.

“Father has gone?” Mina asked, her blue eyes flying to Will’s. “Gone?”

Will stood and took her hand, saying, “May we speak privately?”

He tugged her away from their guests to the opposite corner near the door, whispering once they were out of earshot, “I sent him home this morning, Mina. I’m sorry you didn’t get a chance to say goodbye—”

“Sent him home? Will! How could you?” Mina hissed, aghast. She fanned herself with her hand, blinking away tears. “After all of these years, he visits you and you toss him out like a scrap?”

“Mina! You saw for yourself how rudely he behaved!” Will whispered, fishing out his handkerchief for her, watching as she dabbed at her eyes in a pretty display of horrified sensibilities. “He was determined to make a fool of me, but wound up making one of himself, instead!”

“Oh, Will! Honestly! He wanted to make up with you!” she said, staring at him with reproach. “How could you be so cruel?”

“Cruel?” Will echoed, the word escaping him on a snarling exhale.

Before he could say more, Hannibal touched his elbow and murmured, “Will? Grandfather wishes to see us.”

Mina tipped her chin up, stubborn and proud, and said, “I suppose you’d best be off, then? Heavens know you shouldn’t let your blood relatives come between you and your fairy-tale life!”

“Lady Rathmore, you will join us?” Hannibal offered, holding out his arm to her with such a hard look even Will shivered.

Mina stared at his arm as if he’d offered her an asp to hold, her eyes dark with suspicion. “Please.”

“May I ask what this is about?” Mina inquired, slightly mollified but making her upset known to her brother. She took Hannibal’s arm grudgingly, both of them stiff with irritation.

“There have been some changes to the legalities of Hartford House,” Hannibal said, addressing them both. “Grandfather hoped you might stand as witness.”

Her eyes narrowed then and Will tensed in response, exhaling softly when Hannibal’s free hand brushed down his arm in a gentle caress.

“Why, Hannibal, dear!” Mina said, holding Will’s gaze with subtle victory shining in her blue eyes, “There is nothing I would love more than to witness the fate of Hartford House.”

Mr. Buddish was in Grandfather’s suite when they arrived, along with Anthony Dimmond, who broke into a delighted smile when he set eyes on Will.

“And the morning just keeps getting more beautiful,” he said, rising with his hands outstretched.

Mina moved to take them, giggling. “Oh, how you do go on, Lord du Maurier!”

“Anthony, stop flirting with Will,” Grandfather ordered, taking the wind out of Mina’s sails, much to Hannibal’s satisfaction.

“I must reserve all flirtations for myself,” Hannibal said, taking Will’s hand up for a kiss, laying one on each finger, including the ring itself. “You look somewhat less fatigued than I feared you would, Grandfather.”
“Mr. Zeller’s methods may be unorthodox, but they are certainly effective,” Will said, all of them drawing nearer to the bed where Grandfather sat propped up by pillows, watching them over the tops of his spectacles.

“If I am making an improvement, it is due to my own tenacity!” Grandfather said, affronted, only to reluctantly admit, “However, perhaps there was some good in all of his fussing.”

“Fussing? That man is a shiftless layabout,” Hannibal said. “Who is never here when you need him and always here when you don’t want him. Where is he, by the way?”

“Not here, and precisely where I want him,” Grandfather said, angling a hard, reproving look Hannibal’s way. “Now, down to business. Mr. Buddish has come to settle the matter of the Addendum once and for all. Sit, all of you sit.”

They did so, settling into chairs hastily brought to them by Jimmy, who tended Grandfather in Zeller’s absence.

“As you know, the copy of the Addendum was not able to be traced,” Mr. Buddish said, delving into his papers, still looking travel worn and decidedly pressured, no doubt dragged from his promise of rest by Grandfather’s summons. “I have the original here, however.”

He passed it to Hannibal, who gave it to Will, murmuring, “Be sure of the date.”

“That is quite enough out of you,” Will whispered, but checked the date all the same, which confirmed what both Hannibal and Grandfather had told him. “Did Grandfather tell you there was a forgery, Mr. Buddish?”

“He did, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, his words surprising both Mina and Anthony. “I took a look at it, and it is an outright forgery. Neither paper nor ink is such that we use in our business dealings, though the accompanying note was the one I had sent with the copy, so we can safely assume it has been taken.”

“Who on earth would do such a thing? And more to the point, why?” Anthony asked, declining a chance to look at the paper.

“Mason Verger is an expert forger, I’ve recently been informed,” Hannibal said, carefully watching Mina, who only expressed bewilderment at the name. “I cannot fathom how he may have gotten involved or to what end, but it is too coincidental that he has slipped my huntsman and we have forged documents muddying the waters.”

“Huntsman? What an odd thing to say!” Mina remarked, her brow furrowing. “You hunt men like animals, Lord Clarges?”

“No, an associate of mine hunts dangerous beasts with other dangerous beasts,” Hannibal corrected her, noting how she did not flinch from his words. “He was, unfortunately, beset by something even more dangerous and met an unfortunate end.”

“Gods, how terrible,” Anthony whispered, shaking his head. “What would hunt a hunter?”

“It was a surprisingly similar end to the two officers we had following Mr. Dolarhyde,” Will put in, angling a look at Mina. “Have you had any contact with him, Mina?”

“No! None! Not since I sent him away!” she said, her voice almost shrill with annoyance. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing is implied, Lady Rathmore,” Grandfather said, attempting to soothe her nerves. “It would be of great help and interest to us if we could locate your Mr. Dolarhyde and see where he fits in all of this, that is all. We rely on your help, my dear, now more than ever.”

“I know nothing of him!” she said, hands clenched together in her lap, her cheeks pink with a flush. “You make it sound as if I am... involved.”

“Involved in what, precisely?” Hannibal murmured, his eyes narrowing to dangerous slits. Her tension raised the fine hairs on his nape and Will tightened next to him, as if she teetered on the verge of a confession.

Mina fidgeted, twisting the fabric of her gown in her fingers. She would not look at any of them when she whispered, “In an affair.”

Will’s shoulders fell on a subtle sigh, his suspicious certainty subsiding beneath a wash of relief. Hannibal, however, only stared at her a moment longer, the three other Lecter men taking her measure with weighty consideration.

“This is terribly embarrassing!” Mina said, tears warbling in her voice. She pressed Will’s handkerchief to her face, blocking her expression behind snowy linen. “May I please be excused, Your Grace?”

“No, my dear, you agreed to be a witness and I will hold you to it,” Grandfather said, signaling Mr. Buddish. “You read the Addendum regarding Hartford House, and I want to be sure that your mind, as well as Will’s and my own, is put to rest on the matter.”
“This is the new settlement for Hartford House,” Mr. Buddish said, passing the documents that Hannibal had brought to Will, and Will had subsequently altered. “I have made up a copy, which all you will sign and date in addition to the original. The copy will be left for you, Your Grace, while the original will return with me to be filed.”

Will passed one to Mina and the other to Anthony. Mina’s snuffles died down abruptly as she read in silence, her eyes flicking over the words with sharp attention.

Anthony, however, only skimmed enough to satisfy Grandfather, and said, “This seems all in order.”

“You would be a trustee?” Mina asked, holding the paper in both hands, her blue eyes moiling and shocked. “Hartford House would no longer be yours, Will?”

“No, it is officially part of the inheritance now,” Will said, reaching over to pat her shoulder. “Hartford House will go to Hannibals’s heir, and I will be the steward, so to speak, until our son is grown enough to take control in my stead.”

“This seems very irregular!” she whispered, leaning close to him to hiss, “You would let them get away with this? Will, you…”

“It is done, Mina,” Will said, cutting her off, impatient with her continued attempts to champion an irrelevant cause. “Sign the paper. It is official. You know I never intended to keep control of Hartford House. It belongs to the Lecters.”

She sat back with a glower and whispered with mulish irritation, “Well it does now. I suppose you’ve no choice in the matter!”

“Mina—” Will began.

“Mina, if you are afraid that your brother will be left with nothing to show for his time here, then these should put you at ease,” Grandfather said, handing over the packet of Hannibal’s assets and his instructions for Will’s fortunes as well as Roland’s own. “Anthony, you’re familiar with my wishes, I believe?”

“Yes, Grandfather,” Anthony said, waving a dismissive hand. “Father informed us all of your intentions in case anything should happen to him.”

Mina shuffled the papers, her eyes growing wider and more incredulous by the second.

“In the event of Hannibal’s death, you not only hold Hartford in trust along with the heir’s portion,” she squeaked, lifting one paper like an accusation, “but you also are endowed with this?”

“Most of that applies while I’m still alive,” Hannibal corrected her, his smile wolfish when he added, “I didn’t want to give him too much incentive to pack me back off to the front.”

“Hannibal,” Will scolded, angling a repressive look at him. “He’s right, Mina. I’m well looked after. I know you were very worried I would somehow come to harm, that they would see me stripped of everything and turned out without a future or any prospects, but surely this puts your mind to rest?”

“Yes,” she said, the word a small breath. “Yes, Will darling, my mind is most certainly at rest.”

The papers were signed and dated by Mina, Anthony, as well as Grandfather and Mr. Buddish. The originals were packed into Mr. Buddish’s briefcase and locked up tight before the man was finally allowed to take advantage of the hospitality Will had attempted to grant him. With the paperwork signing safely out of the way, Grandfather was more than happy to dismiss the lot of them to their own devices so he could nap, despite Will’s attempts to speak with him in private about the journal.

“Well, that was exciting,” Anthony remarked, patting his pocket for his cigarette case and dropping his hand with a sheepish grin when Hannibal raised an eyebrow at him. “I’ll just take a turn around the gardens, shall I? Lady Rathmore, would you care to join me? I believe Freddie is enjoying the fresh air. We could find her and surprise her.”

“She’d have to be outside to get air enough around you, you windbag,” Hannibal said, wincing at the jab to the ribs Will gave him.

“I beg your pardon, but I must go to my room,” Mina said, fragile and distraught. “Please excuse me.”

“Mina?” Will said, concerned. “Are you unwell?”

“A small headache, my dear, nothing to worry yourself over,” she said, hastening up the stairs.

“I’ll have Miss Speck bring up some headache powder,” Will called, but predictably received no reply.
“Aren’t you glad I married the wrong one?” Anthony asked, grinning at Hannibal’s expression of vast relief.

“Keep it up and you can stay out in the garden,” Will warned, taking a glance around. “Have you seen Winston?”

“Not since Mrs. Henderson took him downstairs,” Hannibal said, walking them slowly towards the sitting room where Mr. Hawkes was on watch. “Hawkes, was Winston brought back in?”

“He was, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes replied. “Lady Miškinis took a fancy to him, my Lord. He has accompanied her to the Gallery.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hawkes, I’ll go collect him,” Will said, moving back down the hall. “And could you ask Ms. Speck to check on Mina, please? She has a headache and might need something for it.”

“I’ll come with you,” Hannibal offered, pausing when Will called back, “Have a walk with Anthony! I’ll join you in a moment and we can go visit Peter.”

“Excellent plan,” Anthony said, delighted. “I’ve been hoping to see those dogs my valet caught sight of! He said they’re simply massive!”

The discussion grew faint behind him as Will made his way to the massive Gallery that housed the portraits of Hartford’s prior inhabitants.

He found Lady Miškinis standing before the portrait of Saule Lecter, her long skirts trailing out a pace behind her, Winston sitting attentively at her side. Will made a gesture that stayed him when Winston turned, indicating he should stay where he was, and Winston settled for a soft woof of greeting.

“I can hardly believe she’s been gone for so long,” Aunt Aldona sighed. Saule Lecter gazed out from her portrait, captured forever in the bloom of her youth, a beautiful enchantress with dark hair and sparkling eyes and a smiling mouth that seemed to promise secrets eternally on the verge of being shared. “I never got to say goodbye to her. None of us did. We expected such happy news, the birth of a new baby, a little piece of her passed on in the world... instead, we were told she had died.”

Will came to a stop at her side, her perfume teasing his nose. It still stung his senses, but not as painfully, and his stomach had little to threaten him with in retaliation for his discomfort.

“That must have been very difficult for you and your family,” Will said, bending a little to pat Winston’s head and settle him. He straightened, looking up at the portrait in considering silence before saying, “It must be a great comfort for you to see her face again, if only in a portrait.”

“Yes, it is,” Aldona said, a smile chasing away her somber reserve. “She filled the world with warmth like the sun herself, our Saule. That is what she was named for, did you know?”

Will shook his head, uttering a small, embarrassed laugh when he admitted, “I am sadly uneducated in your native tongue, my Lady. It is a mistake I intend to rectify, however, as Hannibal is fluent.”

“I am sure your husband would be happy to teach you,” she said, and her mouth curved up at one corner, a wicked gleam lighting her eyes. “Though it might not be useful outside of the bed you share.”

Will blushed, a surprised laugh escaping him before he could stop it.

“Look at you blush, you pretty child,” Aldona said, reaching up to lay her cool palm against his flushed cheek with a soft, weary sigh. “I wish she had met you.”

Will averted his gaze, uncertain how to respond, but the motherless child in him warmed to her in a way that he didn’t expect and he leaned into her touch just a fraction.

“I wish I had met her, too,” he said, taking a soft breath when her hand dropped from his face, but she grasped his hand and held it, her fingers cold and firm in his own. “Her death left an emptiness that filled with sorrow and despair.”

“Sorrow, emptiness, and despair,” Aunt Aldona whispered, her voice pleasantly low and soft. A frown pulled her features tight when she glanced at where Cyrus’ portrait should have hung.

She seemed so pensive and thoughtful that Will shifted at her side, turning to settle his other hand around hers, enclosing it in both of his in silent comfort.

“Cyrus visited us just after Saule died, did His Grace tell you?” Aunt Aldona asked, and when Will shook his head, she murmured, “Perhaps he didn’t know... Cyrus was in such a terrible state, feverish and speaking nonsense. I was very glad only Tomas and I could understand him. He would have given mother and father such a fright, and just after learning of our Saule’s death...”
“He must have been inconsolable,” Will whispered, thinking of the inscription in his ring with a soft pang of regret for the pain Hannibal’s parents had endured. “They seemed very deeply in love.”

“He was mad with grief,” she said, her thumb rubbing over Will’s ring with tender regard. “They brought him on a litter from the ship, he was so ill. He fell in and out of fevers, saying such frightening things. He said he wished he’d brought Hannibal to live with us. I tried to excuse it as the fever speaking, but not everything that was said could be excused.”

“Perhaps he wanted to share the last part of her that was left?” Will softly offered, trying—always trying—to find the potential for reason in the unreasonable.

“He was sick,” Aldona said, shaking her head. “It was more than the grief and whatever struck him down on the ship. Cyrus was ill. He spoke of flinging himself into the river and forcing his father to start over again. When I reminded him that he had a reason to live in Hannibal, Saule’s legacy to protect, he shouted at me that Hannibal was not his son.”

Will frowned, the little pieces of what Hannibal had ever said about Cyrus coalescing in his memory.

“... have never been so deeply offended in all of my life! It was absolutely absurd, of course,” Aunt Aldona said, shaking her head with a sorrowful sigh. “Even had I doubted Saule, which I would sooner expect the sun not to rise than for her to even bend a vow, Hannibal is the very image of his father.”

“He certainly is,” Will murmured, thinking of Bedelia’s story and the animosity that had existed between Cyrus and Roland without any seeming cause, coming to a head when Hannibal was named the heir in Cyrus’ place. How enraging that must have been had Cyrus still believed Hannibal was not his son?

“No matter how I plied him, how I asked, he would not say it again, would tell me why he thought such a terrible thing,” Aunt Aldona said, angling an irritated look at the empty place where his portrait had once hung, needing a focus for her mute anger. “Even he must have seen for himself that Hannibal is a Lecter, through and through.”

“Have you ever asked grandfather?” Will asked, wondering if the falling out between Cyrus and Roland had occurred over Hannibal’s paternity. Roland would never accept any child who was not of direct Lecter stock into the line of inheritance, he knew. “If there had been any hint of anything unseemly, he would have known.”

“He said it was nonsense, nothing more than the feverish ramblings of a sick man. He had no reason to doubt Saule’s fidelity, and neither did Cyrus,” Aunt Aldona said, her fingers rubbing Will’s in a soft squeeze. “Had Saule not died bringing his son into this world, Cyrus’ doubt would surely have killed her. She loved him more than anything, and until that moment I thought he had loved her just as madly.”

“Only those we love can deal us wounds we cannot heal from,” Will said, smiling slightly when Winston heaved over against his leg with a soft whine. “They were very happy once, and very much in love.”

“It is all so far in the past, now,” she murmured, reaching up to touch the frame with her fingertips. “I wonder how I can still recall it so clearly.”

“Would you tell me about her? And of Hannibal as a child?” Will asked, his curiosity getting the better of him, his tender heart hoping to lighten her mood with recollections of better days. “Perhaps we could walk in the garden? It’s too beautiful a day to stay inside.”

She looked over at him, lips curving into a smile. She slipped her hand free and looped her arm through his, saying, “I have been hoping you would ask.”

Chapter 50

The Dimmonds were the first to leave that evening, having fully enjoyed their renewed contact with Hartford and promising to be much underfoot in the future. In pairs and small parties, Will and Hannibal bid their farewells to their guests in Grandfather’s stead until only Lord and Lady Miškinis remained. They shared a small, delightful late dinner with them, during which Uncle Tomas teased Hannibal mercilessly about the lures, using English for Will’s sake.

“And will Lady Rathmore not join us for a little drink before bedtime?” Aunt Aldona inquired, sitting back as servants smoothly removed the plates and cleared the table for brandies.
“Unfortunately, she is still unwell,” Will said, sipping his drink with great respect for his stomach. For a terrifying moment during the eel soup starter, he’d feared he might have to flee the room to spare himself, the scent was so overpowering. “She also tends to sleep very late, so I doubt you will see her before you depart. Must you leave so early?”

“I have some things to take care of in your Capital before we leave for home,” Uncle Tomas said, leaning closer for Hannibal to light his cigar for him. “We are cutting our time somewhat close, as you say. The straight is very temperamental this time of year and it is not so easy to travel safely.”

“I would never sacrifice your safety, however pleasant I find your company,” Will said, waving away the smoke in what he hoped was a surreptitious gesture. “You must write when you return to the Capital. We could host you at Chelsea House and attend the opera.”

“You darling child,” Aunt Aldona crooned, reaching out to pat Will’s cheek. “You will not be doing any of that soon, hm?”

Will didn’t know what to make of that statement, and a glance at Hannibal showed him his husband hadn’t heard her response. Before he could ask her for clarification, she said, “Will you escort me upstairs, Will? I am very tired.”

“Of course,” he said, rising as she did, relieved to escape the cloying scent of smoke and the stubborn smells of their meal. Hannibal and Uncle Tomas rose, as well, but Aunt Aldona gestured them to sit, saying, “No, no! You sit down and take your time to catch up. I only wish we could have stayed a little longer.”

“So do I,” Hannibal said, moving to grasp her hands in his and place a light kiss on her cheek. “Goodnight, Aunt Aldona.” His vibrant amber eyes lit on Will and he pressed a lingering kiss to his knuckles in parting, whispering, ”I’ll join you soon.”

Will blushed when he glanced at Uncle Tomas and caught him winking at Aunt Aldona, and he hastily tugged his hand free.

“Goodnight to you both,” he said, offering his arm to Lady Miškinis, which she accepted with a small smile. “Forgive me for separating you from the gentlemen,” she said, strolling at Will’s side with her arm looped through his. She was as tall as he was, slender and graceful as a Willow withe. “Only, you looked a little tired to me, a little strained.”

“I am a little tired,” Will admitted, his free hand firmly on the banister as they took the stairs. “Contentment is sapping my energy, I fear. I was never so easily fatigued before Hannibal’s return.”

“I cannot tell you how it relieves me to see him so happy with you, Will,” she said, angling a fond smile at him that Will easily returned. “I had begun to lose hope that he would ever find anyone to wear his mother’s ring. I had begun to lose hope that he would ever be happy, but I can see for myself how happy he is. And how happy you are.”

Will grinned, the pink in his cheeks returning for an encore, and he said, “We make one another very happy, Lady Miškinis.”

“You must call me Aunt Aldona,” she insisted, tugging on his arm. “We are family, after all.”

“Thank you, Aunt Aldona, for speaking so candidly with me today,” Will said, turning carefully on the landing towards her suite. “It cheers me to think that Hannibal’s life took such a turn for the better once you all were allowed to be part of it. Thank you for taking such good care of him all those summers.”

“The only thing that hurt our family worse than Saule’s death was being kept from her son,” Aunt Aldona sighed, squeezing his fingers. They slowed to a stop at her door and she turned to face him, serene and smiling, “but we were overjoyed when His Grace allowed us to keep him at last. It was our joy to show Hannibal his mother’s home, just as it will be our joy to show the child you carry.”

Will cocked his head and said with a bewildered smile, “I’m sorry, Aunt Aldona, but I am not yet pregnant. I’m not even certain I can ever bear Hannibal’s children.”

“Oh?” she said, her dark brows rising over her dancing dark eyes and her lips curving into an indulgent smile. “Perhaps I am mistaken; I am older now, and not so good at guessing as I used to be.”

“I will keep that in mind when we partner at cards,” Will said, delighted when she laughed at his light teasing. He kissed her hands and released them, saying, “Sleep well. I shall be sure to be there to see you off come morning.”

“Goodnight, child,” Aunt Aldona said, and let herself into her room.

Will turned back down the hallway towards his suite, lost in thought and curious. He absently rubbed his stomach, wondering if his recent sickness and sensitivity to scent might be something more than just Mina’s gods-awful tea or his
medicines wearing off. He tried to find anything different, any small indication that there was a life growing within him, but there was no bolt of revelation, no awareness, just a soft sense of contentment that grew with every breath. It was almost too much to hope for, and as much faith as Hannibal had given him in hope, he still feared to tempt his own disappointment with such a fantasy.

“It will come when it comes if it’s meant to,” he breathed, letting himself into his suite to find Jimmy readying his bed and Winston already in his basket.

“I didn’t expect you up so soon!” Jimmy said, smoothing the covers one last time and following Will into his dressing room.

“Lady Miškinis was tired; they have an early start of it tomorrow,” Will said, deftly undoing his buttons as he spoke. “If I’m not up when they stir, please wake me, Jimmy.”

“My Lord, you’re up before the sun itself stirs,” Jimmy reminded him, easing Will’s jacket off and laying it aside.

“I’ve been so tired recently, I feel as if I could nap all the time,” Will confided, holding still for Jimmy to divest him of his pocket watch, cuff links, and pin.

“Don’t worry, my Lord,” Jimmy said, plopping everything to one side to be dealt with after Will was dressed, “it will pass.”

“I hope so,” Will said, shedding the rest of his clothes and shivering a little as the cool air kissed his skin. “Has Ms. Speck said how Mina is doing?”

“She had a dinner tray just after you went into the dining room,” Jimmy said, dropping Will’s nightshirt over his head and tugging it to fall over him. “Other than that, she says Lady Rathmore has done nothing but write letters.”

“An interesting thing to do when one is stricken with a headache,” Will said, oddly annoyed. He stepped into his pants and fastened them himself, sliding his feet into his slippers while Jimmy swept his robe up. “I’ll check on her in the morning.”

“Is there anything I can get you? I can have a tray up before you can snap your fingers, if you’d like a snack before bed,” Jimmy offered, tugging the robe around him and tying it snugly at his waist. “You’ve been eating so little recently, my Lord. I’m starting to worry about you.”

“It’s nothing, it’s just my suppressants wearing off,” Will said, wrinkling his nose a little. “It seems like everything smells so strong I can hardly stand it.”

“Mm-hm,” Jimmy said, gazing at him as if he knew something Will didn’t. “And why would you think that?”

“Because of the side effects,” Will said, putting the same reasoning to his valet as he had to Hannibal. “They must’ve blunted my sense of smell, I think. I shouldn’t have taken those things to begin with, I suppose.”

“Have you felt achy at all?” Jimmy asked, his nonchalance not fooling Will in the least.

“Yes,” Will said, watching him prepare his discarded clothing for washing and tending. “Why?”

“No reason, I just noticed you rub your stomach quite a lot recently,” Jimmy said, bundling it all up on his arm. He turned back to Will with a bright cheery smile and asked, “Should I bring you a tray of some toast and pudding?”

“No, thank you,” Will said, wryly realizing his valet had decided against speaking plainly to him. “I think I’ll just read for a while and go to bed. Tell Mr. Berger not to wait up. There’s no telling how late Hannibal will be. He’s having brandy with Lord Miškinis.”

“I will be sure to tell him,” Jimmy said. “He left a little something for Lord Clarges in his suite as a surprise, so he’ll be glad not to catch him tonight.”

“Oh dear, that sounds rather devious of him,” Will said, putting his spectacles on and glancing around for his book. He almost asked Jimmy if he’d seen it before he recalled taking it to Hannibal’s room. “Goodnight, Jimmy. Be sure to get some rest.”

“Goodnight, my Lord,” Jimmy called after him as Will moved through the dark washroom into Hannibal’s suite, Winston stuck like a burr to his side.

The book was right where Will had left it, sitting on Hannibal’s vanity, neatly swept to one side out of the way for tidying. And situated prominently next to it was another frame of Will’s lures.

Will grinned, laughing softly to himself to think of Mr. Berger sneaking a frame upstairs to leave on Hannibal’s vanity.
“My husband is lucky I don’t anger quickly,” Will said to Winston, the dog’s ears perking with interest at the sound of his voice. He brandished the frame for emphasis and Winston cocked his head, desperate to understand. “This is so typically Alpha, honestly!”

He lowered the frame, looking at what Hannibal had selected. They were not the most beautiful of the lures he’d made, but the most interesting, the most complex, the most taxing. He hadn’t taken them blindly or without purpose, and Will could very easily envision him looking them over with care, plucking down the ones that appealed to him.

All to put on display for guests in their home, a proud Alpha eager to share his mate’s talent with the world.

“Well,” Will said, putting the frame down and plucking up his book. “He isn’t getting off that easily, is he?”

He patted his thigh to call Winston, intending to return to his own room, but Winston jumped up on the bed and got settled, head on paws and eyes doleful.

“Traitor,” Will breathed, smirking. He moved to stroke the dog’s head, ruffling his soft ears, and sighed, “I suppose we can sleep in here tonight, hm? Hannibal can have the Duchess suite.”

Berger had turned the bed down already and Will made himself comfortable, propped up against the pillows with the lamp turned high. He opened to his bookmark and began to read, but found that Mr. Eustace Ballard’s dry, moralistic writing didn’t hold the same appeal as it had before. When he’d been lost and searching desperately for confirmation that his unhappiness was for the greater good, Mr. Ballard’s teachings had offered understanding and resignation. Now... now with so much happiness in his life, with the future he’d once hoped for inexplicably his present, An Instruction for Gentlemen was as dull, dry, and tiresome as a chapel-day sermon.

He was rescued from his boredom by the unexpected approach of his husband, a faint thrum through his bond that grew with anticipation. His heart picked up its pace and a smile teased his lips, a helpless response to his husband’s impending arrival.

The tread of his footsteps was even and swift, the confident stride of an Alpha happily content with his life. Will could hear him humming even before he opened the door and bit his lower lip against a smile when he recognized the melody of his lullaby.

“Will!” Hannibal paused in the doorway for a moment, surprised to find his mate curled up in his bed. Winston bolted down to greet him, tail wagging, jumping in his excitement. Hannibal hastily closed the door behind him and calmed the excited little dog, but he had eyes only for his husband. “I can’t tell you how much pleasure it gives me to see you this way.”

“Reading?” Will inquired, tipping a look at Hannibal over the tops of his spectacles.

“In my bed,” Hannibal corrected, grinning. He shooed Winston with a gesture, straightening to drink in the sight of his mate in such relaxed repose, pink-cheeked and pleasantly rumpled in his fine nightclothes.

“It was Winston’s idea,” Will said, liquid pleasure sliding through him from his bond, the proud delight of an Alpha smitten to his core with his mate. “I’d left my book in here and came to collect it; Winston decided we should stay.”

“Thank you, Winston,” Hannibal said, patting the bed and roughing Winston’s jaws when he leapt back up at Will’s feet. “Very good boy.”

“I told him you could have the Duchess suite,” Will primly informed him, turning the page with feigned nonchalance.

“Oh dear,” Hannibal said, searching Will’s expression for signs that he was teasing. “I take it you didn’t enjoy my surprise?”

He moved to his dressing room already shedding his clothes, leaving the door standing wide behind him.

“And what part was I mean to enjoy?” Will called after him, tasting the air for Hannibal’s rich Alpha scent. It flowed through his senses like rich honey, thick enough to drown in, to wrap around himself like a blanket. “The part where you went up to my workroom and poked about without permission? Or was it the part where you removed my lures without asking, framed them, and then deposited them all over the house without my knowing of it?”

“Well,” Hannibal said, emerging from his dressing room after a long, considering silence. “When you put it like that, I can see why you’d be irritated.”

“How generous of you,” Will said, jerking his gaze back to his book to pretend rapt absorption when he saw Hannibal was wearing nothing more than his light sleeping pants, no robe in sight.

“Isn’t it?” Hannibal asked, sounding so pleased with himself that Will almost laughed. “I’m left with no choice, I suppose.”
Will tipped his chin up to cock a disapproving eyebrow Hannibal’s way, losing his battle with a reluctant smile when his husband patted his belly and said, “I shall have to seduce you with my masculine charms once more.”

“Because it worked so well last time?” Will asked, warning him, “Don’t think you can distract me with your chest hair, Hannibal Lecter. It was badly done of you, you know.”

“It was,” Hannibal said, sitting down at the foot of the bed opposite Winston and pulling Will’s foot into his lap. He worked both thumbs expertly up Will’s arch, his warm hands and long fingers soothing and firm. “I will gladly apologize for invading your privacy, Will. I went up to the attic seeking some sign of your presence here in the House and I found them so beautiful it seemed a shame to keep them hidden away.”

Will poked his nose into his book, toes curling with every stroke of Hannibal’s fingers.

“Some men’s spouses paint watercolors,” Hannibal murmured, working the pad of his foot, “mine makes excellent lures.”

Will chuckled and whispered, “The better to land you with, Hannibal.”

“As if you’ve ever needed anything other than that mind of yours,” Hannibal purred, lifting Will’s foot to kiss the turn of his ankle.

“Shame on you,” Will said, nudging him with his toes. “You need permission to go into people’s private places.”

“I always have permission before entering any of your private places,” Hannibal said, grinning when Will’s cheeks bloomed pink. “Ah, I see you’ve found Mr. Ballard’s grim proselytizing on the benefits of austerity. I seem to recall you once said my boring kisses couldn’t hold a candle to that torturous tome.”

“Your kisses are far from boring and this is not a torturous tome!” Will said, compelled to defend the book he’d grown up with, “I still contest the outcome of that wager, by the way. Startling the life out of me by bursting into my room unannounced is not distracting me with your lovemaking.”

“I had to win somehow,” Hannibal said, tugging on the spine so that Will met his eyes. “What hope had I against Mr. Ballard?”

He leaned close and kissed Will’s lips, a tingling, teasing plumb of his tongue drawing Will’s lower lip between his for a soft suck.

“Is this part of your apology?” Will murmured, tipping his head back with a smile, “or are you wheedling me with your masculine charms?”

Hannibal heaved a soft sigh and said, “Neither, sadly.”

He pushed to his feet, drawing his hand down Will’s hip and thigh in a lingering caress as he rounded the bed for his writing desk.

“You’re writing letters at this hour?” Will asked, his own disappointment surprising him.

“I’m sending some letters of intent with Uncle Tomas,” Hannibal said, settling at his desk and pulling his writing things within reach. “He says he knows of a way to get suppressants to the front and is happy to help us in any way possible.”

“That is very good news,” Will said, settling back and rubbing his foot against Winston’s flank. “With the ships tied up by the military, I was considering leasing a vessel from the North. Even if we have to ship the freight to them overland, at least it will sail without restriction.”

Hannibal paused, gracing his husband with a proud smile. “You are terribly clever.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” Will warned, motioning to his quill. “Perhaps between us and your Uncle Tomas, we can at least get some stopgap measures in place, but the situation is going to require legal action on their behalf.”

“Uncle Tomas carries a good deal of weight at court both here and in Lietuva,” Hannibal said. “He says he can confidently vouch their support if we apply to the court system for a resolution. These soldiers have fought for our country. They should not be punished for that, and I know their Majesties could hardly argue that point. He’s encouraged me to petition the King and I will do so, with Grandfather’s permission, of course.”

“You know, you have a lovely family, Hannibal,” Will said, thinking of Aunt Aldona and what Cyrus had said to her. He couldn’t bring himself to speak it aloud, to even ask if Hannibal knew of his father’s suspicions. He was already so hurt by his past, wounded in ways Will still didn’t know the half of, that it seemed cruel to mention it. There was no doubt in his mind—or in anyone’s mind, for that matter—that Hannibal was indeed his father’s son, no matter the doubts Cyrus may have held. “I do hope we’ll see more of them.”
“We can see as much or as little of any of them as you’d like,” Hannibal said, working swiftly. “They certainly dote on you and I know my grandparents would love to meet you.”

Will looked over at him, his heart skipping a beat. It felt unreal for a moment, as if being here in Hannibal’s bed, happy and content, was a dream he might suddenly wake from.

“Do you think this will be how it always is now?” he asked, trailing his gaze over Hannibal’s strong shoulders, watching the muscles in his forearm play beneath his skin as he wrote.

“Days spent rediscovering old friends and lounging around Hartford with untold legions of my relations threatening us with recollections of my childhood?” Hannibal asked, one brow quirking, the light catching his amber eyes and filling them with sparkling gold. “Gods, I hope not.”

He grinned and Will chuckled, amused.

“We are neither of us used to idleness, Will,” Hannibal said, putting his closing sentiments on the first letter and laying it aside to act as a template for the others. “This is a reprieve, not a warning of days to come, my love.”

The offhand endearment caught Will by surprise, rare as it was, pleasing him even more because Hannibal didn’t realize he’d said it.

“Now that everyone has gone and the House is set back to rights, you and I can go down to Hartford Town and begin looking at locations,” Hannibal said, making quick work of the other letters, eager to be finished and join his mate in their bed.

“For your practice,” Will said, excited by even the thought of it. “Or for the hospital?”

“The practice first,” Hannibal said, blotting the ink. “I’ll rely on you a great deal, Will. I do hope you’ll wish to be a part of it?”

“I look forward to it,” Will said, returning to his book to allow Hannibal to finish his letters in peace. It was impossible to concentrate on the words when his husband was infinitely more interesting to him than the pious Mr. Eustace Ballard, however. He amused himself instead with rubbing Winston’s belly with his toes, chuckling and twitching his foot back when the dog happily gave the sole of his foot a swipe with his tongue. “Winston, don’t! That tickles!”

He took no notice of the considering look Hannibal sent his way, nor of the way that look shifted to the quill in his hand before he signed his last letter. When Hannibal was finished, he moved through his room putting out all the lamps but the one Will was reading by. He slid onto the bed at Will’s side and got settled, brushing his fingers down Will’s arm in a tickling touch.

Will shivered, dropping his book against his chest to look at his husband. He noticed the clean quill Hannibal held and asked, “What are you up to, Hannibal?”

Hannibal tickled his snub nose with the tip of the feather and said, “Arming myself. You have your knees and your fascinating Mr. Ballard, while I have only my chest hair.”

“And your belly,” Will whispered, cupping his hand over Hannibal’s stomach to squeeze him, a light shiver coursing through him. His eyes swept closed when the feather trailed over his cheek and down his lips, the tickling touch strangely arousing. His nerves stretched tight with anticipation, Hannibal’s presence a goad to the desire that welled up within him, always ready and responsive to his touch. When he spoke, the words were an amused, soft murmur, “What are you doing?”

“What does it matter to you?” Hannibal asked, one brow lifting when Will’s eyes flew open to fasten on his. “I cannot distract you from your book, can I?”

Will’s mouth slowly curled into a smile, baring his sharp little Omegan fangs. “Is that a challenge, Hannibal?”

“I think it just might be,” Hannibal purred, delighted when Will made a show of returning to his book, doing his best to ignore the brush of fingers down his thigh, trailing over the slope of muscle in a light caress. The fine linen pants he liked to wear to bed were too thin to be much of a shield between them, even if Will wore them like armor instead. Hannibal caught the hem of Will’s nightshirt and pushed it higher until he bared the smooth skin of his belly, taut and warm.

- The flick of the feather tracing the hem of his pants from hip to hip woke a shiver down Will’s spine. He studiously didn’t look, knowing that he’d toss the book away in a heartbeat in exchange for Hannibal’s kisses, knowing he could give as good as he would get and they both would be the happier for it. His awareness focused down on the brush of that feather tracing idle patterns on the fluttering expanse of his belly, waking nerve endings with every light caress.
Hannibal shifted down his body, sliding the feather along Will's skin to watch it jump and twitch in response. He couldn't resist the chance to lay a kiss on the smooth skin of his hip, right on the knob of bone there just above the lip of his pants. He pressed his sharp, dangerous teeth there and bit him gently.

Will's breath hitched audibly and he tugged the book up closer to his face, hiding his expression behind the sanctimonious lectures of Mr. Ballard, every nerve in his body tuned to Hannibal's touch.

Hannibal trailed the feather over to his belly button, dipping the tip into the dimple with tickling intent that made Will squirm, losing track of the words before him again. He stifled a moan when the feather was followed by Hannibal's hot tongue and the sharp graze of teeth across his tender skin. The soft, loving kiss that followed brought tears to his eyes, placed as it was over his womb, the whisper of Hannibal's words unintelligible against his skin.

“Perhaps,” Hannibal murmured, sitting up to bunch Will's nightshirt higher, tugging it from him, first one arm, then the other around the obstacle of his book, “you should read out loud to me?”

Will tipped the book down, asking, “Tit for tat? You play for me, I read for you?”

“How else am I to be certain you're properly distracted?” Hannibal asked, tossing the nightshirt aside as Will eased back down, the curves of his plump chest and the long line of his graceful body softened by shadows and lamplight. “Shall we refine our terms? If I can distract you from reading aloud, then I win.”

“Even though you've already won?” Will pressed, settling the book back down on his chest, the open cover hiding him.

“I would win properly,” Hannibal corrected, sliding the book to one side to better see him. Will grasped it, holding it up with one hand, his blue eyes straying to the feather where it lay at his side.

Hannibal plucked it up, barely touching the soft edge against the smooth planes of Will's belly. He traced a meandering trail up Will's body, sliding it around the gentle curve of one breast in swirling circles drawing closer and closer to his tightening nipple. He flicked the tender little nub with the barest tip and Will moaned, eyes slitting nearly closed as Hannibal teased him with that feather. The brushing touch was too light to do anything more than prickle his senses, promising greater pleasures to be had at his hands and lips and teeth.

“You're even more sensitive than usual,” Hannibal whispered, the feather drifting to the other side to tease Will's opposite nipple to flushed stiffness. “Are you distracted yet?”

“No,” Will purred, shoulders relaxed, the tilt of his body putting his chest on display for Hannibal's awed, enraptured gaze. The feather traced the curve of his lips and the stubborn tuck of his chin, flicking down beneath his jaw to brush over the mark Hannibal had left on him. Will stretched beneath the touch and turned his head, the sensitive scar responsive to the light play of the feather over it.

“You are the most beautiful person I've ever known,” Hannibal murmured, his eyes fastened to the feather as he traced the cords of Will's long neck, swept the hollow of his throat and the thin skin stretched over his sternum. The blue veins beneath the surface of his rosy skin were more prominent, a faint tracery of his life's blood that Hannibal followed with the feather's tip. His physician's mind cataloged it, but Hannibal resisted being self-indulgent in his wishful thinking. Only time would tell the truth of things, and for now he would treasure and pamper and tease and love this amazing Omega with everything in him.

Hannibal shifted to straddle him, deliberately settling over Will's heated groin, smirking to feel the responsive twitch he won. “It must be terribly absorbing, Mr. Ballard’s book.”

“I would say that it is not,” Will told him, albeit rather breathlessly, “but I wouldn’t wish to poke holes in your ego.”

Hannibal chuckled at that, delighted, relentlessly flicking one nipple with the feather until both peaks hardened even more, pert and straining and reddened from the rush of his blood.

“Is that you poking at my ego just now?” Hannibal asked, feeling the sudden surge in Will's sex when he slowed to a gentle rub, his free hand braced on the bed at Will's side to ease the burden of his weight. “You know, there are... ways we could manage, if you're interested.”

“I think we've managed rather well to now, don’t you?” Will breathed, gasping when the feather dipped down to play over his ribs, his skin tight and tingling.

“I wouldn’t be opposed to seeing how well I play the Omega, and you the Alpha,” Hannibal purred, letting his weight rest just a shade more over Will's heated groin. “I’m curious what it would be like, and it seems a shame to let your ample endowments suffer a lack.”
Will turned a satisfying shade of bright pink and raised his book, draping it over his flushed face to avoid both Hannibal’s assessing gaze as well as answering him.

Hannibal chuckled, amused by his response, and stretched over Will to kiss his way up, drawing one fat, taut nipple into his mouth with care.

Even the gentlest suck made Will tighten, his body tensing as if for impact. Hannibal eased back, gently teasing it with his tongue instead, careful with him. His touch was tender when he cupped Will’s other breast, the brush of his thumb light against his sensitive skin. He worried that Will’s hypersensitivity might make things too uncomfortable to continue on, but when he drew back, Will pushed forward.

“You haven’t distracted me yet, Lord Clarges,” Will breathed, biting his lip when Hannibal resumed the light, teasing touches that went straight to his groin. He was wet and ready, his swollen sex trapped beneath the weight of Hannibal’s body straddling him. His mind strayed to his husband’s suggestion and it left him unprepared for the soft rasp of his teeth. It brought a shock that made Will’s eyes momentarily blur with pleasure, it was so unexpected. His mouth parted on a soft gasp and he wriggled, belatedly trying to hide the movement under the guise of getting more comfortable.

“It certainly is a shame,” Hannibal breathed, his hot breath puffing over Will’s taut nipple, now dark and fully erect, delightfully large and inviting. “That I cannot distract you.”

He coiled up to kiss him, pushing the book aside, his hand tangling in Will’s curls as he cupped his face. His mate opened to him, wet and inviting, the same lips that whispered to him of love, the same lips that wrapped so eagerly around his hard body to bring him pleasure. His wondrous mate, taciturn and teasing by turns, infinitely fascinating, confoundingly complicated in some ways and surprisingly simple in others.

“Gods, how I love you, Will,” he breathed, sighing the words into his mouth, whispering them against his soft tongue and sharp teeth as if feeding Will his love bite by tender bite.

Will was painfully hard beneath him, pressed up beneath Hannibal’s full sac, his heat easily felt through the light pants they both wore. Hannibal knew it might take some time to bring his mate around to the idea, but he’d been honest when he said he was curious. He’d never push if Will said not to—all it would ever take was a single word—but he’d made the suggestion and knew his husband would give it the benefit of his curiosity.

“Will,” he said, coiling his tongue out to trace the fullness of his lower lip, “I think I may have distracted you…”

“You’re getting there,” Will whispered, his lax fingers tightening on the book. He pushed Hannibal up with his free hand and rolled beneath him to prop the book on the pillows. Feeling somewhat victorious to have his obvious weakness hidden, he cleared his throat and began to read in a voice that was not exactly steady or calm.

“If a man is to be truly a gentleman, he must be an exemplary example of forthright, stalwart trustworthiness to those around him,” he read, pushing his sensitive chest hard against the fine sheets to keep the material from bothering him, though he throbbed with the lingering touch of Hannibal’s mouth and fingers and that damned feather. “One cannot be seen as a man who breaks his bond, and to maintain a position of strength, one must have principles—”

His words stuttered when Hannibal swept his hands up Will’s scarred back. A moment later, the feather traced down the dip of his spine and up again, chasing a shiver that Will couldn’t restrain. He closed his eyes, shuddering as Hannibal traced the marks on his skin, finding the bloom of nerves and teasing them to life in what must surely seem a barren field of horror.

But he didn’t see it as such, by the way he touched Will, nor had he ever. He slowly dragged the feather over Will’s skin, watching goose-flesh dimple up where it was smooth. He traced each ridge and knot of scar tissue, lips and tongue following the feather tip.

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, the fine hairs on his nape rising, the sensations so keen he could hardly focus. Even though Hannibal had never shied away, had always accepted those scars as simply part of the Omega he loved, Will felt compelled to offer, “You don’t have to.”

“You say that as if I shouldn’t,” Hannibal purred, sliding his mouth over to nip Will just beneath the wing of his shoulder, his breath spilling in a hot wave beneath Will’s arm. “Shall I tell you what I see?”

He sat back, his weight pressing Will’s hips into the bed as he settled down on his bottom. His warm, calloused hands cupped Will’s neck and swept down as he purred, “Broad shoulders like ivory, delicate yet strong.” His fingers dipped into the hollows of Will’s arms, a brief tickling touch before they spread over his sides. “The graceful curve of a waist I could spend an
eternity caressing." The touch trailed to the small of Will's back, Hannibal's thumb pressing against his spine and rubbing upwards. "The bed of your spine flowing beneath your skin in a rise and spill of bone, strong enough to bear the weight of your pain but so fragile all the same." He tipped forward, pressing a sucking kiss to Will's nape. "But when I touch you, when I watch your skin move beneath my fingers and hear the tiny catch in your breath, when I taste your skin with the sweet scent of you filling my senses, what I seek to please is not made of this flesh, merely housed by it."

Will shivered, tipping his head to pull his muscles tight beneath the kiss that trailed over his shoulder.

"You say I don't have to," Hannibal whispered. "I say I do. My desire for you takes many forms, Will, none of them more important than the other, but in every way I am greedy for you entirely."

Will's eyes flew wide when Hannibal's weight suddenly lifted off of his backside. He was still lost in the sensual delight of his husband's words, unprepared to have his pants tugged down and off. He looked back over his shoulder with one brow raised, grinning when he found his husband taking a critical look at his backside.

"Don't mind me," Hannibal murmured, admiring the view of his mate's delectable bottom mounded over the perfect tuck of his waist. "Or am I distracting you?"

"It is only that I do not usually read in the nude, Lord Clarges," Will said, making a show of returning to his book, and if it shifted the long length of his back, why then turn about was fair play. "I would not say that I am distracted."

"No, indeed," Hannibal said, feeling pleasantly satisfied just looking from Will's curly dark hair down his slender pale body to his curled little toes. His little slit was hidden by the bulge of his soft sac and the taut curves of his round cheeks, but Hannibal knew he would find him there, that modest little opening slick and willing to be explored. "Please, Will, continue with your reading."

The movement of sliding Will's pants off of him had pulled his hard sex flat to the bed, a firm and enticing jut of flesh there between his pale thighs. Hannibal plucked up the feather from where it had fallen aside, anticipation and desire making him tremble. His pride in his mate nearly overcame him, and he was once more struck with awe that such a surprising and inspiring personality could be housed in such a perfect form.

"One must have principles," Will read, shivering softly at the gliding brush of the feather up his calves, the lingering circles drawn in the hollows of his knees. It was difficult to concentrate on the pious text before him with his husband so determined to distract him, but Will wasn't about to let him win so easily, so he found his place and began again. "Fidelity to one's purpose is the first step in maintaining solid principles."

The feather slipped over the curve of his bottom, prickling his skin with anticipation as it skated downwards, a slow, almost painful drag against his eager flesh.

"One can never argue from a point of weakness," Will said, his breath escaping on a harsh gasp when Hannibal flicked the feather over the soft bulge of his sac, sweeping it longways over his smooth skin. The world narrowed to that touch, the blood rushing from his head in eager anticipation, flooding his skin with a flush of color that made him more sensitive still.

Hannibal paused for a moment, struggling to control himself, the sight of Will so aroused beneath him almost too much to bear. His clothes felt unpleasantly scratchy, an encumbrance between himself and the smooth heat of his precious mate. He ached to stretch over him and push deep but he restrained himself, his desire to bring Will pleasure outweighing the needs of his own aching flesh.

He dragged the tip of the feather lower in a teasing, light brush and Will tensed, breathless with anticipation. The bare, grazing touch drifted down the length of Will's ruddy sex, flicking his swollen head as if by accident.

Will's belly pressed into the bed as his back arched, his haunches tightening, a blissful, throaty moan dragged out of him. The blossom of pleasure flared beneath the tickling, teasing caress of the soft feather against him, his slender body wracked with shudders.

Hannibal drew a shaky breath, swirling the tip of the feather against the sensitive head of Will's sex, and asked in a broken, husky murmur, "You were saying?"

Will wiggled, uttering a low, keening moan as he sought more friction than the soft feather could give him. It took him a long moment to gathering himself, to drag his concentration from the light touch of that feather brushing over the insides of his thighs, over the ripe heft of his sac, down the twitching length of his painfully eager sex.
“One can never argue from a point of weakness,” Will read, finding himself in just such a position at present. “Always be in full possession of the facts as they present themselves and at no point allow any one of them to escape your attention.”

Will squirmed beneath him until Hannibal couldn’t bear it a second longer. He flung the quill to the floor, listening to the soft, raspy music of Will’s voice as he reined himself in. He spread his palms over the heft of Will’s backside, weighing his warm flesh with an appreciative purr before giving both silky globes a lusty squeeze. The pressure of his hands parted them slightly, giving him a delightful glimpse of Will’s slick slit and virginal anus, which had the most peculiar effect on Hannibal’s own vivid imagination yet again.

“Maintain truth in all exchanges, consider objectively all protests to your position and prepare to defend your stance with humility and faith,” Will said, his voice rising slightly when he felt Hannibal’s thumbs slide between his cheeks to open him up. He tried to pull his thighs together but he couldn’t, not with his husband there between his legs. Heart pounding with anticipation, Will turned the page with a hand that trembled, his fingers fumbling the page.

“A gentleman’s staunch defense of his purpose will inspire those about him to reconsider their own purpose!” He ended the sentence on a high-pitched yelp when hot breath poured down the cleft of his backside quickly followed by the wet prod of Hannibal’s heated tongue tracing the slight rise of flesh where his sac narrowed to cradle his slit.

“Are you reconsidering your purpose, Will?” Hannibal asked, his voice husky. He nibbled softly at the wet, soft entrance of Will’s body, tasting the thick flavor of arousal moistening those slight, sweet lips that kept him so modestly closed.

“B-benevolence must also play its role,” Will managed, ignoring him. He drew a deep breath that dragged harshly, his lids falling half closed and his hips tilting invitingly as Hannibal’s tongue traced a wet, leisurely trail over his sac down the firm shaft of his trapped sex.

He lost his train of thought then, clenching hard from the tickling tease of Hannibal’s mouth on the sweet spot just below his head, bared so completely by the way he lay spread out on their bed. “H-Hannibal—”

“Are you distracted yet?” Hannibal asked, curling his tongue around the leaking head of Will’s sex to suck it gently up into his mouth, mindful not to pain him with the strange position. Will shuddered hard and Hannibal stroked his delightful bottom, keeping gentle suction on him as he delved his thumbs back between Will’s cheeks. He slid both into the giving heat of Will’s tight passage, curling them against the constricting ring of muscle that fluttered desperately for a knot to squeeze. Even the idea of it made him moan and Will shuddered again, the vibration of it drawing a desperate sound out of him.

Hannibal released him with one more deep suck and lunged up to plunge his tongue between his thumbs, tasting Will deeply, exhaling a soft groan at the way his little mate squirmed and wriggled against him, growing more slick by the second.

“Be above unkindness,” Will gasped, mewling mournfully when Hannibal retreated, but it quickly changed to a sob of pleasure when Hannibal returned to him, bare and hard and firmly feeding the swollen, hot head of his sex into Will’s tight and eager body.

“Be above unkindness,” he said, losing the words for a moment as Hannibal sank inside of him, slow and deep but so gentle. His large, strong hands gripped Will’s hips and tipped him for deeper access, holding him there to meet the rocking, deliberate push of Hannibal inside of him. The possession of it brought Will to the shivering cusp of orgasm, every bit of him wanting nothing more than to revel in Hannibal’s attention, to bring Hannibal to his knees with pleasure, both of them caught in the tie that would bind them in soul as much as in the flesh.

“Be above unkindness and the weakness of belittling others to your own benefit,” Will said, rearing up a little to better feel the heavy thickness spreading him open, such a tight squeeze that it burned, but it was a burn he gladly cherished, feeling every exquisite inch of Hannibal’s wide sex sliding into him and the brush of his knot as it began to rise. “But do not hesitate to engage with those who would seek to correct you, for abandoning one’s principles—”

Hannibal panted, a ripple of pleasure flooding through him as he arched against Will’s solid backside, squeezed to the hilt in giving flesh. He was rapidly overcome by his young mate, lost in the heated grip of his body, wanting nothing more than to endlessly caress his soft skin and cover him in kisses, to feel the yielding push of his taut flesh and hear the soft, throaty sounds of his whimpers mingling with the pleasant timbre of his voice. He took a deep breath and hitched Will’s hips up just slightly, just enough to change his angle, and sighed as he sank fully once more into Will’s welcoming, wet heat.
“For abandoning one’s principles—” Will shuddered, losing his place as Hannibal rolled his hips and changed the angle of his rocking thrusts, his swelling knot pressing tightly to Will’s wet slit and taut sac, a teasing promise of even greater pleasure to come. “...abandoning one’s principles...”

Hannibal swept one hand over Will’s round backside, greedily memorizing the view of him down the slope of his body. He was so achingly gorgeous it was unearthly, the kind of beauty that found its home in the works of Masters, captured in paint and stone to be shared throughout the ages, leaving the world in awe that anyone so magnificent had ever walked this earth.

“...abandoning one’s principles,” Will moaned, reciting half from memory now, rapidly unable to keep his focus against the growing pleasure swelling in his body. Hannibal was inside of him, looming over him, touching him and squeezing him—it was still as overwhelming and exciting as it had been the first time, so much so that Will could hardly bear it, “will inevitably lead to moral decrepitude”— The word cracked on a throaty moan as orgasm threatened, tightening his body, squeezing him down around the thick flesh moving within him.

Hannibal felt Will’s body clutch up, rhythmically clenching, and his breath came out in a harsh gasp. The book fell onto the pillow, forgotten. Will undulated beneath him, sinuous and sleek and every imaginable perfection he could ever ask for, gasping again in a desperate bid not to lose their bet, “M-moral decrepitude.” His long back rippled, bowed, canting his hips up perfectly, utterly open, utterly ready.

The next roll of Hannibal’s hips pushed his knot deep and Will came undone, gripping up around him so hard that Hannibal groaned with a pleasure that was almost pain.

“Ah! M-moral d-decrepitude—” Will moaned, every nerve in his body focused on Hannibal inside of him, on the pleasure that tripped his words up and scattered his best intentions to leave him writhing on the fat, painfully delicious stretch of the knot filling him fit to split him apart. His hands clenched in the bedding and he half sobbed, the intensity of it dragging sounds out of him that were more animal than anything.

“Gods, Will!” Hannibal hissed, rocking into him, trembling with the need to spill himself but held back by his desire to see Will this way, unraveling around him, caught in a web of pleasure that made him liquid with sensation. His gorgeous little mate tipped his hips again, straining back onto him, and the constriction on his knot was so exquisite that Hannibal arched hard in orgasm, fingers tight on Will’s slim hips to draw him closer, harder, deeper onto him. “Oh, gods, Will, how can you be so perfect?”

“Hannibal,” Will moaned, heady urgency in his voice. His slender but strong legs folded up, then, pressing to Hannibal’s backside and thighs, trapping him close as the first stuttering shudders of Will’s orgasm began. “Hannibal!”

Hannibal lunged up over him, flattening him to the bed, tucking up around him in a blanket of flesh and scent until the boundaries of his world started and stopped with the Alpha above him. The orgasm that shook Will’s body milked Hannibal’s own, drawing a deeper, almost painful pleasure from him as the flood of his seed began. Will wriggled beneath him, hips shifting from side to side, teasing and tugging on his knot to please the places within him that craved friction, pressure, and touches to make it all the sweeter.

Hannibal roused himself enough from his own enjoyment to wedge one hand down beneath Will’s slick and heated body, fingers finding the wet and swollen head of his sex squeezed between the mattress and his firm belly. He curled his fingers and took him firmly in hand, groaning when Will went rigid and breathless in another orgasm, gasping harshly and sobbing with the force of it, the pulse of his hot seed wetting Hannibal’s fingers and the coverlet beneath.

With a purr of pure contentment, Hannibal relaxed into the pull of release, bonelessly draped over Will’s slowly easing body as he poured into him. Even that was a sensation remade with new pleasures by Will’s responsive Omegan body, his knot rhythmically milked, the vibration of it encouraging his heavy sac to clutch up and offer more and more of what Will’s body demanded.

Nearly senseless with the force of it, Will went limp beneath the weight of Hannibal’s body. The press of Hannibal over him thrilled him in ways he still couldn’t quite admit to, the implicit possessiveness something he would have soundly rejected a handful of months ago. Now, it felt perfectly right to be this way, spent and breathless in a tangle with his mate, locked together in the prolonged pleasure that made knotting so much more than a biological imperative. Pleasantly exhausted, treasured and protected, Will purred beneath the pressure of Hannibal’s heavier body, skin tingling with the soft, grazing kisses to his nape.
“I suppose you've won,” Will told him, adding with a winsome smile, “Though I can honestly say I haven't lost by it.”

“And I can honestly say,” Hannibal murmured, trailing kisses up Will's jaw to his round cheek, “that the words ‘moral decrepitude’ now have an entirely new meaning for me.”

Will chuckled, admitting, “Just as I will never hold a pen without blushing like a virgin. You chose your weapons wisely, Hannibal. I am thoroughly distracted.”

He felt for the book and lifted it, but was prevented from closing it when Hannibal took his weight on his elbow and plucked it up.

+ “I owe Mr. Ballard an expansive thank you note,” Hannibal said, giving Will a final squeeze before sliding his slick hand from beneath him. He idly wiped his fingers on the bedclothes and propped himself up on both elbows, trying to balance his weight on his knees and arms so as not to entirely flatten his firm little mate beneath him. Will's legs were still folded up behind him, the smooth muscle of his calves pressing against Hannibal’s backside, a distracting pressure and display of easy comfort Hannibal still took great delight in.

“You'll have to address it to the Capital Centre Cemetery,” Will said, drowsy and satiated, reveling in the press of Hannibal's furry belly and chest trapping him against the bed. “He's been dead some fifty years now.”

“Rather longer than that, by the looks of his writing,” Hannibal remarked, thumbing through the book balanced on the pillow above Will's disarrayed curls. He tossed the book to one side and eased down atop him again, nibbling the shell of his ear before breathing, “Remind me to burn that book before our first child is born.”

“That’s rather extreme,” Will said, though he understood the sentiment. “It is merely a facet of instruction.”

“It is a tool for deconstruction,” Hannibal said, nuzzling him and relaxing with a sigh. “No child of ours will ever need to be anything other than precisely as their nature requires.”

“Even our Omegan child?” Will asked, purring when Hannibal coiled tighter against him, wrapping him in strength and heat.

“If every single one of our four dozen children is Omegan,” Hannibal murmured, kissing Will just behind the adorable curve of his ear, “then I will be the richest man in the world five dozen times over.”

“Four dozen?” Will squeaked, breathless laughter escaping him. He reached back and caressed Hannibal’s cheek, warning him, “I'm not willing to spend the rest of my life in various stages of pregnancy, Hannibal, thank you very much. We'll be lucky to have even one, all things considered.”

“Oh, I am already lucky,” Hannibal reminded him, clasping Will more tightly to his chest and rolling onto his side, neatly tucking his mate into the curve of his body. “And greedy, and an arrogant Alpha who expects to have my way at all times. I am confident we’ll have a child, Will, and I’m certain we can have as many as you please.”

“Ass,” Will breathed, chuckling when Hannibal shifted over him to kiss his lips. His knot pulled and tugged pleasantly as Hannibal worked the covers down, drawing them back up and over their joined, heated bodies. The long day had thoroughly exhausted him, and before Hannibal could even put out the bedside lamp, Will was already asleep.

Hannibal curled against him in the darkness and whispered, “I love you, Will.” His hand slipped to Will's belly and spread there just beneath his navel, the sweet, fertile flavor of his mate's scent lulling him to sleep.


The dinner party and the business with settling their affairs had taken their toll on Roland. He wasn't as capable as he'd been five or even ten years ago, and felt the years of his long life like lead weights on his limbs.

He groped into his nightstand, drawing forth the small portrait he'd kept all these years.

“I'm very tired, Charles,” he breathed, rubbing his fingers over the frame. “You should have told me how tired I would be...”

He trailed off, startled from his heavy thoughts by the arrival of Jimmy Price.

“Your Grace? I thought I'd check in before going up,” Jimmy said, coming closer to tuck the blankets around him. He said nothing about the portrait, only took it from Roland's lax fingers and put back in the drawer where it had come from. “Can I get you anything to help you sleep?”
“No, Jimmy,” Roland said, shaking his head. “The old have too little time to waste sleeping. We’d rather waste it lamenting the mistakes of our past.”

“That doesn’t sound very comforting,” Jimmy said, dimpling up in a smile. “I think I’d rather sleep!”

“How is Will?” Roland asked, his sinuses burning with the sense memory of Will’s changing scent—sugary sweetness with a rich undertone like aged Peninsula brandy.

“Afraid to trust his instincts, I think,” Jimmy said, puttering about tidying, always hard at work. “But well enough, provided I can get him to eat more than two bites of anything Mrs. Pimms makes up.”

“I’ll send instructions down regarding his meals,” Roland said, gesturing vaguely at him. “Please, don’t let me forget. He needs all the pampering we can give him, Jimmy, as you know well enough. Let me know if anything changes.”

“What? No! No,” Zeller called, letting himself into Roland’s suite still filmed in travel dust, coming in straight from the road. “I will get it.”

“No, you just got back,” Jimmy said, drawing up. “You look terrible, by the way. Go clean yourself up, I’ll get him some milk and you can get underfoot tomorrow.”

“I’m here,” Zeller said, flinging his saddlebag down on a chair despite Roland’s ferocious glower. “And when I’m here, I take care of things.”

“Well,” Jimmy said, nose tipping into the air. “When you’re not here, I take care of things, so you’re welcome.”

“Yes, thank you, I appreciate that, but I can handle it,” Zeller said, shucking his coat with the same irreverence he’d shown the saddlebag.

“Obviously,” Jimmy said, gathering up Zeller’s coat with a wrinkle of his nose.

“Children!” Roland scolded, scooting up to sit straighter. “Thank you for taking such excellent care of me in Zeller’s absence, Jimmy. You may go.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Jimmy said, and added with a defiant glare Zeller’s way, “I’ll put the milk on.”

“Thank you,” Zeller called, hands on hips and annoyed.

“Behave yourself,” Roland said, fumbling his spectacles on as he spoke. “You rushed in here in quite a state! I expect you’ve found something of interest?”

“You might think so, and I wasn’t in a state,” Zeller said, digging in his saddlebag. “Your kind get into states, us regular folk don’t have that kind of time.”

“Considering how often I’ve caught you lazing about taking naps when you should’ve been attending me,” Roland said, gesturing for the papers Zeller pulled free, “I’ll take that with a grain of salt. Here, hand that over. Is it all from Brauner’s office?”

“Every bit,” Zeller said, giving him the papers before moving to pour himself a glass of water.

“You stole these?” Roland asked, flipping through the pages.

“No, well, yes,” Zeller corrected, gesturing with the glass. “I stole the originals and holed up copying it all, then returned the others. That’s what took so long. Sorry.”

“Never mind that, you got what I asked for,” Roland said. “And lucky for us, Mr. Buddish is here to take these in hand.”

Zeller gulped the water and followed it with a shot of brandy before he wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

“Go have something to eat and take some rest, Zeller,” Roland said, stacking the papers and starting from the beginning. “I doubt I’ll be sleeping anytime soon.”

Zeller mulled it over, watching him carefully, and finally said, “Jimmy’ll be up with your milk, but come morning we’re back on schedule.”

Roland made an absent, noncommittal noise at him, already absorbed in the information he’d been given, but roused himself enough to call after him, “Tell Hannibal and Will I wish to see them first thing tomorrow! And I’m very relieved you’ve returned safely, you brat!”

Zeller let himself out with a snort of laughter, but Roland was already buried back in the paperwork, relieved to have an excuse not to face his dreams and the memories they contained.
Morning found Will up in advance of the sun without Jimmy's assistance, roused from his sleep by the scent of Mrs. Pimms starting the servants' breakfast all the way in the lower levels. His stomach gave a woeful rumble and Hannibal answered it in his sleep, purring against Will's nape and squeezing him close.

The door cracked just enough for a shadow in the lesser darkness of the hall to whisper, "Winston, come."

The dog lifted his head and Will sat up, holding the rumpled covers to his chest to whisper, "I'll take him, Mr. Berger."

"Oh! Sorry, m'Lord, I didn't mean to wake you," Berger said, quietly horrified.

"You didn't," Will said, groping for his robe and dragging it on in the darkness, his toes seeking out the slippers he'd discarded next to the bed. "Go have your breakfast. I'll see to Winston."

"Yes, m'Lord," Berger said, closing the door with a soft click.

Will moved to stand but felt a little light-headed and eased down to sit on the side of the bed, rubbing his temple. Winston wiggled up closer and put his muzzle in Will's lap, whining softly until Will stroked his ears, whispering, "It's okay, Winston. I'm fine."

It passed after a moment, and Will chided himself that he must find an appetite soon, if this was any indication of his health, but the thought quickly vanished as he cleaned up and got ready for his day.

He had more than Winston's walk in mind in those predawn hours. Aunt Aldona had planted a seed that Jimmy's pointed remarks had thoroughly watered and Will Lecter-Graham found himself in dire need of answers one way or another. Rather than raise Hannibal's hopes for no reason, he opted for the next best thing—the Hartford library.

After a soothing dawn-lit stroll with Winston, his pistol, and no less than five of the hired guards Hannibal insisted on keeping at hand, Will returned to the library with a murmured request for Mr. Hawkes to bring him a tray, if it wasn't too much trouble. The Lecter library was vast, organized by necessity and regularly tended to by a librarian, but Will knew it well enough. He'd spent many a long winter reading away the snowbound hours, but he had never ventured into any Omegan studies of any kind until now.

Winston flopped before the fire, pleasantly tired from their walk, keeping one eye on Will as he settled with his book. He was dismayed to find it rather out of date and possibly not accurate, but it was certainly better than nothing, and he thumbed through the index to find the section he needed.

Will read quietly, eating the small breakfast Mr. Hawkes brought him in thoughtful, absorbed silence. It was porridge thickened with honey and goat's milk accompanying a tempting variety of bland fruits peeled and cut, along with one small cup of coffee and a large pot of tea. Will ate every bit of the porridge, hungrier than he'd expected and craving the sweetness, abandoning the bitter coffee after only a few swallows for the sweetened tea.

He lowered his cup, considering the changes he'd been experiencing and what he'd attributed them to. He was so lost in reflecting on what he'd learned from that old medical text that it took him entirely by surprise when Hannibal entered the library unannounced, calling, "Ah! Hawkes said you were here. They're preparing to leave, are you—what is that?"

"Nothing," Will said, sliding the book from his lap and down by his side. He placed his cup back into its saucer, realizing Hannibal noticed how he trembled. He bit his lip against his desire to confess himself, to compare Hannibal's knowledge against his own and see what his husband made of it, but now certainly wasn't the time. "I'm coming."

"I hope you haven't gone and rescued Mr. Ballard," Hannibal said, his sharp, curious eyes searching for the title as Will reshelved the book, but he was unable to make out the script.

"No, nothing of the sort," Will said, approaching him with Winston at his side. His soft, affronted yelp was smothered in a brief kiss and he scolded, "Hannibal! I've just eaten!"

"And you still taste just as sweet," Hannibal praised him. He pulled back with one hand still cupping Will's face, his smile falling with quizzical concern. "Are you unwell, Will?"

Will gazed into his eyes, the words straining to burst from his lips, yearning for confirmation of his suspicions.

"No," he said, swallowing it back like a secret, needing it be just his own for a little while longer, but his smile was wide and happy as he said, "Everything is wonderful, Hannibal. Everything is perfectly wonderful."
Chapter 5

Hannibal’s mate was keeping a secret from him.
And whatever it was, it made him even more beautiful, despite the faint shadows beneath his sleepy blue eyes. Will seemed to glow from within, radiating contentment with every slight smile and serene gesture. He seemed... settled somehow in the space of a night, as if some weight Hannibal was unaware of had been lifted from Will’s shoulders to leave him free at long last.

“Hannibal, are you paying attention?” Grandfather scolded, annoyed.

“No,” Hannibal admitted, tearing his gaze off of Will, who was sitting with poised grace next to him in the conservatory where Roland had taken his breakfast. Hannibal wished the summons hadn’t come so soon after his Aunt and Uncle’s departure, but even he couldn’t put off his grandfather when the old Duke demanded his presence.

“Not the answer I hoped for!” Grandfather said, scowling. “Mr. Zeller came into possession of a paper trail. I will not say how he did so, only that these are copies. Mr. Buddish, when you leave, you will take these with you to the Lord Chancellor to be added to the investigation into Lord Rathmore and create copies for the detectives in Will’s case.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Mr. Buddish said, standing quietly to one side, but watchful and alert and a good deal more rested than he’d been the day before.

Will held the paperwork closer to Hannibal, as if his very nearness wasn’t distraction enough to render the gesture useless.

“Please tell me I am not seeing this correctly,” Will said, delving into his jacket pocket for his spectacles, but even after perching them on his snub of a nose to take a closer look, the evidence remained the same.

“You are seeing it correctly,” Grandfather said, rubbing his forehead. “Mr. Brauner is not precisely a scrupulous man, but he is an exacting one and keeps excellent records.”

“No doubt in case he needed leverage against Lord Reddig,” Hannibal remarked, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the documents.

“Little though he has outside of Broadriver,” Will said, knowing better than to mention the dowry Hannibal had returned.

“The letters are in order,” Grandfather said, grim. “His first visit, Mr. Brauner reports that Mr. Verger does indeed confirm that his son has intimate knowledge of Hartford House and can produce any forgeries ‘required’, and gods know the use of that word alone is enough to rob me of sleep for what years I have left.”

“Grandfather,” Will said, frowning.

“You’ll outlive us all, you old goat,” Hannibal murmured, already reading the second letter, his eyes narrowing with rage. “So, Lord Reddig and Mr. Verger both wanted the same thing—Mason Verger back on this country’s soil.”

“Yes, and the money used to bring him here was stolen from this House!” Grandfather snarled, his hand clenching into a fist and slamming down on the arm of his chair so hard that Winston yelped in surprise.

“Good gods,” Hannibal whispered, he and Will both scanning the lines. “He gave him the location of the money he’d stolen?”

“Some,” Grandfather said, his agitation sharpening his comforting Alpha scent to that of burnt paper and hot oil, flagrant warning that he was as angry as Will had ever seen him. “He wouldn’t give him all of it, of course, but he wanted his son back and he wanted assurances that Mason would be protected.”

“Francis,” Will breathed, seeing the Alpha’s name near the bottom of Mr. Brauner’s letter. “Francis Dolarhyde was to be his protection.”

“Will, I cannot say I am so certain now that your sister is not involved,” Grandfather said, trembling as he turned to face his beloved grandchildren. “Every report Zeller has of his activity, every trace of anything that involves him was initiated by Lady Rathmore.”
Will blanched, the implications converging all at once, the doubts that held them at bay no longer strong enough to do so.

“There is a chance that Lord Reddig used Mina to draw Dolarhyde back,” Hannibal said, reaching to give Will some small thread of hope. He took the papers from Will’s limp hand and folded his fingers around his mate’s, worried by how pale he’d gone. “I admit to having had very few conversations with Francis, but there is one thing I am positive of—he despises Lord Reddig to his very soul. I very much doubt he would do anything in that man’s interests.”

“If he was aware of his interests,” Will softly said, his free hand settling over his belly to gently rub. “If Mina said nothing, if she gave him direction, then he would heed her.”

“Using your sister as a buffer? How underhanded, but not surprising,” Grandfather growled, shifting in his chair. “Bring her down here at once.”

“Your Grace,” Will said, not invoking the more familiar address, not attempting to use his sway as a grandchild in this, “please, allow me to speak with her.”

“I am sorry, Will, but in this I must follow my instincts,” Grandfather said, his amber eyes hard as stone. “She is your sister. Despite her treatment of you, I fear that she would find some way to manipulate you into thinking her the victim. I will speak with her. Bring her!”

Mr. Hawkes quietly left, the whispered instructions sent on their way with a footman.

“Why on earth is Lord Reddig interested in Hartford House?” Hannibal mused, reluctantly releasing Will’s hand to turn the paper over. “Forging what, precisely? All our business goes through Mr. Buddish, Will’s included.”

“I couldn’t say, but I am very glad we have the inheritance settled,” Will said, relieved that Hartford wouldn’t be at risk. “Mr. Buddish, if you could please keep an eye out for purchases made in my name? It seems rather odd to drag a man back from exile to forge cheques with my signature, but Lord Reddig has always been somewhat strange.”

“Perhaps he felt Mason’s status as an exile would be enough to keep him quiet, should anyone start to ask questions,” Hannibal said, scowling.

“And Mr. Verger certainly holds no goodwill towards me,” Will reminded him. “I had him fired and imprisoned. It’s no wonder he was willing to part with his ill-gotten gains. Not only did he get his son back, at least in theory, but he also has the pleasure of knowing he’s working against me.”

“What a spiteful little toad,” Hannibal said, incensed. “I should have spit-roasted Lord Reddig when I had the chance.”

Will skated a sideways glance at him, wrinkling his nose at that suggestion but not disagreeing.

“We can safely assume that since Lord Rathmore had contact with Verger, he was the one who put Lord Reddig onto him in the first place?” Hannibal asked.

“The man in Timothy’s employ was listed ahead of Mr. Brauner,” Will said, effortlessly recalling the information from memory. Hannibal cocked a brow at him, and Will said with a touch of reproach, “You can check if you like, but I’m certain I’m correct. I still cannot say how Timothy ever learned of Mr. Verger, or what on earth he hoped to accomplish. He has no stake in Hartford or any reason to involve himself in my father’s machinations.”

“Lord Reddig would have known about Mr. Verger,” Hannibal pointed out. “Broadriver is not so far from here, and I’m sure it was gossiped about here in the country, even if it was inconsequential in the Capital.”

“You think he asked Timothy to get into contact first?” Will asked.

Hannibal shrugged, offering, “We may never untangle who initiated what and why, but we do know that both your father as well as Rathmore have been in contact with Verger and they seem to share a common goal.”

“This is all very troubling,” Grandfather said, angry that so much of what was happening was outside of his knowledge or control. “Rathmore, Reddig, Verger—Will’s accidents, Matthew Brown’s disappearance, the death of Mr. Tier. All of it is just profoundly disturbing.”

“If my father is involved in Timothy’s activities,” Will said, concerned, “then he must be desperate, indeed. His involvement in the Council is not surprising, but I would never have thought he would deal in treason.”
“You must prepare yourself for a bad outcome,” Roland warned him, tapping his finger on his chair arm for emphasis, “because I will not tolerate this. I will not tolerate it! This House, we Lecters, I will protect at all costs!”

“Grandfather,” Hannibal said, his concern mounting when Roland fell into a coughing spell, his face flushed. “Grandfather, you must remain calm.”

“How can I?” Roland asked, pulling his handkerchief from his jacket to wipe his lips.

“You must find a way,” Will said, moving to fetch some water for him, holding the glass until Roland’s trembling subsided. “You must think of your health.”

“You won’t be protecting anything from the grave,” Hannibal pointed out, earning himself a stern stare from his mate.

“Lady Rathmore, Your Grace,” Mr. Hawkes announced.

“Well,” Hannibal said, holding his hand out to Will and drawing him down to sit, “This should be interesting.”

Mina was strangely subdued when she came into the room, almost as if she had expected the summons. Will noted she had taken pains with her appearance even with such short notice, arming herself in her beauty to disarm her opponent.

“Your Grace,” she said, coming to a stop without acknowledging either Will or Hannibal. “You called for me?”

“Yes, Lady Rathmore,” Grandfather said, the Alpha vibration in his voice gaining force. “I have some questions I would like to ask you, and you will be honest with me, if you value your position with our family.”

“I am always honest, Your Grace,” Mina said, her hands clenched before her to hide her trembles. Will ached to stand at her side and shield her, but Mina had made her decisions, and some of them may have nearly killed him. His generosity did indeed have its limits, though he wished it could be otherwise.

“When did you first decide to bring Francis Dolarhyde into your employ?” Roland asked.

“I do not precisely recall, but some years ago, Your Grace,” she answered, offering nothing further, no excessive gushes of information.


“I suppose it was nostalgia, Your Grace,” Mina said, bewildered but anxious to please. “And my husband, Timothy, mentioned him to me.”

Will exchanged an uneasy glance with Hannibal, relieved that Mina’s back was to him.

“That didn’t seem strange to you?” Roland asked, his words sharp and short. “That your husband would mention a man you had not seen in years? A man that he had never set eyes on?”

“Not particularly, no,” Mina said, shaking her head. “I spoke of my childhood quite often, Your Grace. Timothy has always been very interested in me... used to be, rather.”

“So your father did not suggest it?” Roland pressed, staring at her with stern displeasure.

“My father? No, Your Grace,” Mina said, her shoulders squared and straight. “No, Mr. Dolarhyde left Broadriver suddenly after defying my father. The two of them are best kept very far apart.”

“How did he react, then, when he saw Francis in your employ?” Hannibal asked.

Mina turned to look at him, but it was Will’s gaze she caught. “Will? Have I done something wrong?”

“Please answer my grandson, Lady Rathmore,” Roland prodded, taking another sip of his water, his flush fading as he calmed.

“He was angry at first,” Mina said, shifting to face all three of them, her chin tipped up in stubborn pride. “But he has never crossed me in what I want.”
“Why did you want Francis, Mina?” Will asked, his voice soft and coaxing. “What made you seek him out in the first place?”

“He helped you, Will,” she said, her mouth trembling. “When we were children, he sacrificed his place at Broadriver for your sake. I felt he deserved more for his efforts than to be abandoned to his fate. I dared to hope he could be so brave again.”

“I don’t understand,” Hannibal said, shaking his head. “Surely years ago you could not believe that your brother was in some sort of danger, here?”

“When has he not been in danger here?” Mina asked, reaching up to brush away a tear that slipped down her cheek. “Will, from the moment you were married, I regretted the part I had played in persuading you.”

She turned her pleading blue eyes on him, strained and hurting, dark hollows beneath betraying her lack of sleep.

“Father was so... satisfied with himself, I suspected he must have thought you would suffer here,” Mina said, her words gaining speed as if she feared an interruption. “And as you know, my marriage is not all I have pretended to.”

“You needed an ally,” Will murmured, frowning. He thought of Mina in the weeks before he’d left for Hartford, how excited she’d been ordering her wedding gown, how eagerly she’d anticipated becoming Lady Rathmore, and how little she’d gained for her hopes.

He knew all too keenly how terrible it felt to have such potential wither away beneath harsh reality, and his heart lurched in sympathy.

“The presence of Francis Dolarhyde in my household prevented a great deal of strife,” Mina whispered, her slender body tense and straight, her chin tipped up in a familiar show of pride. “Then there were rumors circulating, talk about Hannibal and his mistress.”

“Is that why you asked Anthony what Hannibal’s intentions were towards me?” Will asked her, recalling the day he and Anthony had gone fishing, how worried Anthony had been that she’d inquired after him.

“Yes,” Mina said, crying so much so that Hannibal wearily offered her his handkerchief, unimpressed. “I went and stayed in the Capital with our sister, Iris. She told me of the former Lady Clarges, of the mystery surrounding her disappearance, and I sent Francis to see what he could find out. I saw Lord du Maurier some time after.”

“And what did he say?” Will asked.

“He said that he imagined Hannibal would soon return to take his place at Hartford,” Mina said, a soft tremor running down her body, “and I knew that could only mean one thing. I tried to find you and warn you, and I sent Francis in my place to be by your side and shield you until I could arrive.”

“So at no point has your father given you instructions regarding Mr. Dolarhyde?” Grandfather asked, not about to be diverted by tales of selfless, sisterly love.

Mina shook her head emphatically, warbling, “No, Your Grace. He did at some points ask me if I would be willing to part with Francis for an errand or two, to tell him that I was the one asking, but I refused him. I had always thought Francis was a good man.”

“Until suspicions fell on him regarding two murdered men?” Hannibal inquired, rubbing his thumb over Will’s knuckles. “Forgive me if I sound leery, Lady Rathmore, but you have painted a very innocent picture and I am not certain it quite covers the canvas.”

“If Francis has involved himself in anything unsavory,” Mina said, a slight hiccup shaking her shoulders, “it’s nothing to do with me! I have had my fill of scandal, Lord Clarges. I have heard the rumors about me and my actor friend. I have faced censure for my reasonable reactions to my husband’s lifestyle. No matter your assessment of my character, I am not the type of woman who will align herself with murderers and thieves!”

Thieves.

“She drew up with a soft gasp, shocked that he would ask her.
“Has he done something unforgivable?” Will whispered, holding her wide blue eyes. “Something which frightens you? Something you need to distance yourself from?”

Her hands shook hard as she lowered them and her voice was harsh with tears when she said, “I really could not say.”

“Mina—” Hannibal said, preparing to insist, but Will drew on his arm.

“No, Hannibal,” he said, sympathy softening his voice. “She really cannot say.”

Grandfather cocked his head, mouth pursing in a frown as he gazed at Mina.

“You’ve made sure you know nothing of his dealings,” Will murmured, seeing her with his Gift. “You’ve made sure the world knows that you know nothing. It is why you’ve lived apart for so long, isn’t it?”

“Even the gentlest among us will defend herself when trapped,” Mina whispered, dropping her chin, staring at the floor in the very picture of defeat, “and I have never been gentle. I accept that none of you trust me, though I admit I cannot understand your reasons, but please... please do not think badly of me.”

Mina dissolved into tears, her shoulders hitching, and Will did rise then. He put his arms around her and held her to his chest, stroking her fragile back and crooning to her.

“I am spoiled and think too well of myself, I know,” she wept, lifting her hands to clench her beringed fingers in Will’s lapels. “I am childish at times and do things I know better than to do, and there are moments when my jealousy has led me to be cruel, Will, and I am sorry for it!”

Grandfather digested that, his expressionless face like marble, impassive and unmoved. Hannibal caught his eye, finding similar wariness reflected there, but he knew that his mate was too fond of his sister to hold anything against her for very long.

Which made it imperative she go, and quickly, because he could not trust that her accounting of things was the truth.

“I don’t understand what more Francis has done,” she said, dragging the handkerchief up to blot her eyes, “but if it is as terrible as murdering those men, I am sorry to have brought him here.”

“You are excused, Lady Rathmore,” Grandfather said, his voice still holding a rumble of Alpha displeasure that plucked at Will’s instincts.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said, pulling away from Will with sorrowful pleading in her teary blue eyes. “You have been so kind to me, all of you. I would never jeopardize that, not for the world! If there is any help I may offer, anything I should know—”

“It is handled, Lady Rathmore,” Hannibal said, his tone so sharp that even Will flinched.

Mina blotted her tears, ducked her head, and left the room with the meek quietude of a lamb.

There was a long silence after her parting. Mr. Buddish, used to the Lecter Alphas, stood stock still and drew no attention to himself.

“How touching,” Hannibal said, surging to his feet and reaching the widow in two quick strides. The gardens stretched out before him, verdant with growth, but he saw none of it in his anger.

“Don’t be cruel,” Will said, troubled by what he’d heard. “She is hiding something, but I cannot believe it has anything to do with Francis or his actions. Whatever my father is planning, he has done so with Timothy and without Mina’s knowledge.”

“That is very generous of you, Will,” Hannibal said, his displeasure thick enough to taste.

“You saw for yourself how quickly she collapsed, Hannibal!” Will said, frustrated that his husband and his sister were so determined to dislike one another. “One sharp word from Grandfather and she broke like a dam! Unless you believe she is lying?”

“I believe that she was raised in the same house alongside you and that she is a good deal more cunning and perceptive than I have previously given her credit for,” Hannibal said, his body a long, tight line of irritation. “I cannot trust that she would not see an opportunity and once more choose to save herself at the expense of someone else! I am sorry, Will, but I cannot trust her.”
“Then do not! But whether she has lied or spoken the truth, we will get nothing more from her,” Will pointed out. “The best we can manage is to preclude her from any discussion on our dealings.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, the sharpness in his voice softening when he turned to face his husband, his anger a thin veneer over the worry that tugged and pushed at his bond. “She cannot stay.”

Will’s mouth thinned with displeasure, and it was only by virtue of the bond that he did not get angry. “She is my sister, and a lady, and I will not throw her from this house as she once imagined you would do to me.”

Hannibal flinched and Will instantly regretted his choice in words. He crossed the distance between them and laid his hand on Hannibal’s arm, hard as stone beneath his touch.

“I apologize, Hannibal, that was uncalled for. Please let’s not quarrel,” he urged, holding Hannibal’s amber gaze. “I will suggest she go stay with father, or perhaps with another of our sisters. I will make arrangements for her to take a holiday by the sea—anything but send her back to Timothy.”

Hannibal’s tension fell beneath the touch of Will’s hand and he softly said, “I know better than to quarrel with you, Will. I never pick a battle I cannot win.”

He gathered Will’s hand from his arm and brought it to his lips for a kiss, and Grandfather said, “Whether she is to be believed or not, I’m in agreement with Hannibal, Will. Lady Rathmore has overstayed her welcome.”

“I understand, Grandfather,” Will said, and this time he did use the endearment deliberately. “I know that you must find my sentiments toward my sister unnecessary given her treatment of me, but I take no pleasure or satisfaction in treating others as they treat me. She cannot be faulted for the way she was raised, or the flaws our father encouraged in her, just as I cannot be faulted for loving my twin.”

Grandfather looked aside, a frown creasing his face in lines, but he did not rebuke him.

“And now that we know Timothy is the one who called Francis to mind,” Will went on, taking a deep breath, “I am reasonably certain it must have been my father who encouraged him to do so. Mina is no fool, but that doesn’t mean she is immune to manipulation. If Timothy mentioned Francis in the same breath as being glad to never meet him, that would be enough to goad her into seeking Francis out.”

“Surely this cannot have been years in the making?” Hannibal said, frowning as he considered it. “Whatever they planned would have been accomplished much more easily before I returned.”

“Things don’t always go according to plan,” Grandfather said, absorbed in his thoughts. “As long as those plans never come to fruition, then we must content ourselves with the few crumbs of information we are able to gain.”

He turned his amber eyes to Mr. Buddish then and said, “You are free to return to the Capital at your leisure, Mr. Buddish. You have your instructions.”

“I do, Your Grace, and thank you,” Mr. Buddish said, adding, “Lord Clarges? I have some information for you, if now is a good time?”

“Yes?” Hannibal asked, lowering his hand with Will’s fingers still clasped in his.

“Mr. Hobbs has been scheduled for execution, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, moving to claim the papers from the chair where Hannibal had discarded them.

“When?” Hannibal asked, his fingers tightening on Will’s.

“Next week, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said. “Miss Ho—Miss Foster has made it known that she wishes to attend.”

“She cannot attend,” Hannibal said, appalled, his horrified eyes seeking out Will’s before pinning Mr. Buddish once more. “I forbid it!”

“Unfortunately, neither you nor I have any say,” Will reminded him. “She is her own woman now and can decide for herself.”

“This is outrageous!” Hannibal said, offended. “She cannot possibly think to watch her father drop from the scaffold! What a horrible thing to even imagine! She cannot know what she is asking for!”
“The Lord Chancellor will accompany her, my Lord,” Mr. Buddish said, ordering the papers with swift ease. “She will be out of public view and in his presence, but she was very adamant that you not accompany her.”

“That is absolutely out of the question!” Hannibal decided. “Of course I will be there!”

“No, you will not,” Grandfather said, and when Hannibal turned that offended gaze on him, the elderly Alpha shook a finger at him and said with more force, “You will not! You are needed here! The child has made her decision and she is right, Hannibal!”

“Grandfather!” Hannibal said, gathering his arguments.

“No,” Roland said, shaking his head. “If you go and you’re seen—and you will be seen—then everyone will once more recall that the events happened at Marsham Heath! People will ask questions all over again and your involvement in the Hobbs affair will be dragged back into the light. If you do not wish to undo all the good you have done for her sake, then you must restrain yourself in this.”

For a long moment, Hannibal said nothing, only stared at his Grandfather with defiance that begged to be unleashed. It reminded Will uncomfortably of the day he’d first come to Hartford, freshly married and anxious, and how Hannibal had challenged the elderly Alpha with dangerous anger. The bond seethed with upset, frustration battling the understanding that Roland spoke only the truth. He squeezed Hannibal’s hand with sympathy, aching for him because he, too, felt the same. But protecting Abigail, helping her find her path, meant distancing themselves from her for now. The fact that it was temporary did little to make it less painful.

“And when she comes to the Fosters?” Hannibal asked, his voice taut and tight. “When she is brought to Duxbury to meet her family? Will I still be expected to remain apart from her and pretend we do not know one another?”

“Hannibal,” Will said, the Omega in him determined to mediate, the husband in him urging Hannibal to a wiser course than to clash with his grandfather yet again.

“No,” Roland sharply said, surprising them both. “As shocking as this may sound, Hannibal, I do concern myself with your happiness and contentment. Or do you think I would risk estranging myself from you as I did with your father? Hm?”

Hannibal subsided, his sharp anger falling away.

“I want you to be happy, Hannibal. I want both of you to be happy,” Roland said, his gaze flicking from Hannibal to Will. “You’re just beginning to know one another, and that is a delicate place to be, just as integrating into her new life will be a delicate place for Abigail. All I ask is that you give yourselves time to settle before seeking a closer acquaintance.”

The soft touch on his hand and the calming sweet fragrance of his mate’s scent soothed Hannibal’s innate Alpha umbrage. He exhaled on a nod, and said, “I will give all the time required provided I am certain you will not seek to keep me from her. Regardless of the circumstances, she is still my stepdaughter and I will provide for her as such.”

“We will provide for her,” Will softly corrected, raising his limpid blue eyes to Roland’s. “Grandfather would never imagine otherwise, would you, Grandfather?”

Roland scowled but kept his thoughts on the subject to himself.

“The Lord Chancellor has arranged for her to be a guest of his daughter’s for a few days following the execution, under her new name of course,” Mr. Buddish said, expertly maneuvering himself into the sudden silence, a consummate peacekeeper used to handling the Alphas who employed him. “When she is ready, I will arrange for her to come by train to Chesterton where the Fosters will meet her.”

“We will not see her at all?” Will asked, an unexpected pang of upset shooting through him, and not just from his bond. When he’d last seen Abigail she’d been shaken, mute with fear over what she faced, their parting perfunctory due to the circumstances, and he’d so hoped to have a chance to mend that parting.

“She cannot stay with the Fosters forever,” Hannibal said, equally as unhappy. “We will see her, and soon, Will. I promise.”
The promise coaxed a smile out of him, but before Will could reply, Mr. Hawkes returned to somberly announce, “Mr. James Gray has arrived, Your Grace. He says he is here to see you, Lord Clarges.”

“The painter? For Willy?” Hannibal said, confounded, and Will winced, his hopes for keeping his gift a secret dashed in an instant. “What on earth for?”

“I called for him,” Roland said, his gruff tone belying the wink he sneaked Will’s way. “Will’s portrait is six years overdue and I haven’t the time to wait longer.”

“Well,” Hannibal said, looking at his mate. “I don’t suppose you can argue with that, can you? But you should’ve told us of the appointment, Grandfather. I had hoped to—take Will riding.”

The strange, truncated end to his sentence brought Will’s brows up with curiosity, but Roland waved it away, saying, “There will be plenty of time for that! You can go riding and let Mr. Gray do his work in privacy. You’ll be sitting for your own portrait soon enough.”

The consternation that filled his husband’s face almost drew a laugh from Will, and his sputtering denials fell on deaf ears as Grandfather wheeled his chair towards the door, calling, “I am going to write a great many letters and I don’t wish to be disturbed! Mr. Buddish, if you wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mr. Buddish said, gathering up his case and hurrying to accompany Roland from the room.

The door clicked closed behind them and Will arched a brow at his husband, asking, “Riding?”

“Yes, well, we could take a carriage, but I assumed you would prefer to ride,” Hannibal said, grinning. “I’ve made arrangements to go to Duxbury this afternoon with Chiyoh. I had no idea Grandfather would surprise us with portraiture.”

“I think the two of you should go,” Will told him, his skin tightening as Hannibal’s thumb brushed over the ring on his finger. “Take Chiyoh to see Lady Murasaki’s grave and speak privately. I’m sure there are things she would prefer to tell you in confidence.”

“Are you certain?” Hannibal asked, smoothing his hand over Will’s cheek and behind his ear, his touch gentle.

Will nodded, and said, “Yes, I’m certain. I don’t feel up for such a long ride, honestly.”

Hannibal smiled, leaning in to place a kiss on Will’s forehead. “You do seem rather tired recently. Perhaps Mr. Gray might paint you in repose? You could take a nap, then. Even settle in with Mr. Ballard’s preachings?”

“I’m afraid Mr. Ballard is quite tainted by my moral decrepitude,” Will chuckled, covering Hannibal’s hand with his own. “Take a picnic lunch, spend some time with her. It might be good to be prepared for what we’ll read in Lady Murasaki’s diary.”

“You can read it while I’m gone, if you wish,” Hannibal said, rubbing his thumb beneath Will’s tired blue eye, brushing the soft fan of his lashes when he blinked.

“I won’t read it without you,” Will said, leaning into his touch. “And while I hate to suggest it, I really think we should keep its existence to ourselves for now.”

“Not tell Grandfather?” Hannibal clarified, frowning.

“His health is fragile and this business with my father and Lord Rathmore has him very upset,” Will said. “I’m worried he might... react badly. He and Lady Murasaki were certainly not friends. Even Chiyoh is leery of him, no doubt due to her time in your father’s household. If he should demand the translation and the journal, neither of us could refuse him.”

Hannibal’s frown deepened, but it was thoughtful, considering. After a short silence, he admitted, “His temper is not all it could be. We’ll read it first, and then approach him with questions.”

“I truly think that would be for the best,” Will said.

“One crisis at a time,” Hannibal whispered, giving Will’s fingers a fond kiss. “I do hate going without you.”

“Well, you must,” Will said. “Grandfather will have his way. But would you please take Chiyoh her fee? And the box, as well? I promised a handsome compensation for speed and she’s done a remarkable job.”

“I will,” Hannibal sighed, leaning in for a kiss. “I’ll have Jimmy fetch it down. Shall I see you in to meet Mr. Gray?”
“No, that isn’t necessary,” Will said. “And take your time today, Hannibal. Who knows when Chiyoh will return again or when you’ll have a chance to speak. Don’t feel pressed to hurry back. I carry the pistol, I have Winston with me and the guards keep constant watch, so you needn’t worry on that count.”

“I will always worry on that count, Will,” Hannibal said, kissing his hand. “Always.”

As little as he liked leaving Will behind at Hartford, Hannibal still felt a keen eagerness to see Chiyoh and speak with her again, and with his mate’s blessing he quickly found himself possessed of a picnic lunch on his way to Duxbury with his childhood friend.

There was no sense of strangeness between them as Hannibal feared there might be. She was quiet at first, concentrating on controlling her mount, but when Hannibal teased her about her riding, her brilliant smile opened the way for easy conversation. It led on to their life together at Galley Field and Chiyoh’s life now in the Capital, where she had been apprenticed to a potter and quickly learned a trade that she enjoyed.

“It was difficult at first, and I was older than most of his apprentices,” she said, swaying gently in the saddle, her hat shading her from the strengthening sun, “but now I have my own shop, my own apprentice. It is not the life I imagined I would have, but I am proud of what I have made of it.”

“As well you should be,” Hannibal said, impressed, preemptively turning his stallion’s nose away from Chiyoh’s grumpy mare. He angled a curious look her way and asked, “What life did you imagine as a child, Chiyoh? Before you were taken from Galley Field?”

She smiled, his eyes sparkling as she answered, “I imagined that I would grow up to be a warrior, like Lady Murasaki. I dreamed that I would join a pirate ship and plunder a fortune. That I would return to rescue her and we would go back to Nippon, back to her home, and she would finally smile.”

“Do you remember Nippon?” Hannibal asked, and when she arched a look his way, he admitted, “We have not yet read the translation... and I think I would prefer to hear some things from you before I hear them from her ghost.”

“I have no memories of Nippon,” Chiyoh said, shaking her head. “I was an infant when we left, only spared to serve as a warning, an example of benevolence that would not be shown again.”

The bitterness in her voice grew heavy, her lids narrowing down over her eyes.

“Lady Murasaki lost that final battle. When she returned home, I was all that remained,” Chiyoh said, leaning forward to pat her mare’s mane. “Everything else had been taken or burned. She had only herself, the horse she rode, the armor she wore, and me. She could have joined another warlord, could have lost her life in battle as she once imagined she would, but instead she sold her father’s armor, she sold her beloved horse, and she purchased passage on a ship for us.”

“To where?” Hannibal asked, turning his head against a gust of wind that nipped at his ears. “To the Continent?”

“We were refugees,” Chiyoh reminded him. “We did not choose where, only to go. She had little money, but she had her cunning. She used what she had left to purchase a costume, a foreigner’s mockery of our artists’ clothing. She told the ship’s captain she was the Emperor’s lover, and I was his daughter, that she hated him for abandoning us and wished to seek sanctuary in the court of his masters.”

“Good heavens, that was quite a gamble!” Hannibal said, the confidence of that move somewhat admirable. “Did she make it to court?”

“She did,” Chiyoh said, her smile wry. “She caught the eye of a prince, purposefully so. She was an Omega of great power in her homeland, and wished to be one of great power again, because only through power could we survive. The weak will always perish, she would say. She saw how people viewed Omegas and she pretended to those illusions, then defied them. She played with powerful men as pawns, resenting their weakness, angry at them for their foolishness.”
“It must have been difficult, living in a strange land among people whose customs are so different,” Hannibal mused, picturing the Lady Murasaki, her mussed hair hanging around her face, her dark eyes heavy-lidded and cloudy, a puff of acrid smoke rising up from her parted lips.

‘And what is a boy’s love worth, hm? It doesn’t make my life better, does it? You give it to me one day, Hannibal, when your love is worth something…’

Resignation reflected back to him when she looked at him, her eyes seeing nothing, her hand shaking when it touched his cheek, cold and soft.

‘When you take your father’s place at your Grandfather’s side, then you can love me, Hannibal, then you will be a man who can help me. Until then, you are just a little faun, and should be wary of the lion’s gaze…’

“Hannibal?” Chiyoh asked, her steady gaze curious and calm.

“I’m sorry?” he said, flushing. “What was that?”

“I said it was not so difficult. She made a study of the people who invaded our lands,” Chiyoh said, not pressing for an explanation. “She learned their languages and their ways. She did not trust her spies to tell her the truth when she had an army of lives on her shoulders. She listened and learned. She said she would never be taken by surprise as her father was so many years before.”

“Chiyoh,” Hannibal said, somber. “Did my grandfather betray her family? Is he the one she wrote of?”

She frowned, taking her time to answer. “I will let her tell you their story, Hannibal. It is not my place to say.”

Their story. That alone told him all he needed to know, and his impatience to know the truth sucked some of his enjoyment away.

“When two strangers meet, neither knowing the language or behaviors of the other, there are bound to be misunderstandings,” Chiyoh said, taking pity on him. “An offer on one side might be construed as pressure on the other. I can say that neither of them intended the result, though it took many long years for Lady Murasaki to realize the truth she held was not the truth of her enemy.”

It left Hannibal silent and reflective as he guided their horses down the steep slope to the graveyard. The somber quiet of the cemetery prevented conversation, as did Chiyoh’s reverence for the dead. She walked at Hannibal’s side like a shadow of Murasaki herself, a thought that gave him a chill as they reached her graveside.

He waited a short distance away, watching as Chiyoh knelt at the weathered tombstone. She spoke softly to her, the murmured words teasing his memory with the sound of Murasaki singing beneath her breath as she rocked him, the long coils of her hair tickling his nose, her arms cradling him in warmth.

He opened his eyes, the sensation of being a young child fading, the memory of her replaced with cold stone overgrown in moss. Chiyoh had finished her communion with the dead and simply stayed there, kneeling on the ground, lost in thought.

Hannibal moved to her side, crouching cautiously to murmur, “I had always wondered why Grandfather allowed her to be buried here. She was never married to my father, never officially a Lecter. It seemed strange to me, considering how little they liked one another.”

Chiyoh turned her head to look at him, the movement graceful, her eyes weighty with thought, but she only said, “I am sure he had his reasons. Where will he be buried, when his time comes?”

Hannibal nodded just behind them where a modest mausoleum already held the remains of his grandmother, dead now these past thirty years.

Chiyoh followed the look, and when she turned back to Murasaki’s grave, it struck Hannibal that his father’s concubine was placed facing where his grandfather would one day rest, as if even in death he wished to keep a wary eye on her.

“She used to sing to me,” Chiyoh said, touching the inscription of her name. “She had such a beautiful voice, and she remade herself for the stage. Such people are granted access to every household, every court, she said. Yet even when she sang all night long, she would save her voice enough to sing to me. She sang to you, too, at first, before he forbid it.”
“Why did he forbid it?” Hannibal asked, plucking at a weed, pausing when Chiyoh stilled his hand. “Why did she... why was she so cruel to me, Chiyoh? I used to think it was simply her nature, that Omegas were all like her.”

“There were never Omegas like her,” Chiyoh said, releasing his hand when she was certain he would stop. “He did not tell her of you, Hannibal. When we first came here, he sent a man to fetch you from your family. You were very small still, too young to speak. Your father had not yet returned and you were left alone in the nursery.”

Her voice grew softer as she spoke, a whisper almost lost in the rustle of wind through the aged branches overhead. “I watched her go to you. I watched her watching you as you cried. She lifted you into her arms and sang to you, as she did to me. But your father was a jealous man...”

She traced Murasaki’s name again, frowning.

“For every kind word she said, he said ten that would hurt you,” she breathed, shuddering at the memory of it. “If she shielded you, he would turn on us both. The more she loved you, the more he punished you, until she finally decided that she would give you something else instead.”

“What she gave me instead was a terrible distrust,” Hannibal admitted, surprised by the ache in his heart. “My only memories are of her belittling me, rebuffing me... How can you think she gave me anything other than a lifelong hatred of her?”

“I don’t,” Chiyoh said, simple and direct. “Lady Murasaki abhorred weakness, and you were the flaw in her armor. It was better to crush you, to make you hate her, than it was to see you destroyed for loving her. ‘I am poison,’ she said. I remember how she wept, but she built a wall between you to keep you safe on the other side. She could not give you love, so she gave you distrust, hoping you would guard yourself against those who would seek to hurt you.”

"She nearly ruined me,” Hannibal said, unable to meet her searching gaze. "I hated her so much, Chiyoh. I still cannot abide the thought of her."

"She betrayed you," Chiyoh said, a simple summary of the pain he’d endured at her hands. "She imagined that she spared you in doing so. She longed to love you. She even planned to take us away from him—me, you, and the child she carried."

“Mischa,” Hannibal whispered, seeing her again, slack in her mother’s lap, lifeless and limp. He twitched when Chiyoh touched him, shying away from the hand she laid on his shoulder. “He took you as surety, to force her to stay by his side. Punishment, you said. For what? For trying to leave him? Why was he so cruel to her? To us all?”

Hannibal’s brow wrinkled in a frown, but Chiyoh did not answer him. Instead, she turned to Mischa’s grave, her stern expression softening in a sad smile. “She was the last in the Murasaki family line. Will you tell me about her, Hannibal? Mischa, Lady Murasaki’s child?”

Hannibal drew a breath that shook, touching the flowers that had faded and dried and scattered since his last visit.

“When those we love are gone, we seek them in our memories,” Chiyoh said, squeezing his shoulder in a surprisingly strong grip. “Tell me of Mischa, Hannibal, and I will tell you what I remember of the man who was your father.”

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Mr. Gray was a solemn, middle-aged man with little interest in conversation who was already set up in the brightly-lit drawing room facing the settee. He had, Will was not surprised to see, a full-sized canvas prepared, and not the miniature he had commissioned.

“Mr. Price arranged both when he came, my Lord,” Mr. Gray informed him, arranging Will to sit in a comfortable pose and turning his head just so. “He said you wished for a miniature and His Grace requested a portrait to match.”

“It is impossible to keep a secret in this house,” Will sighed, settling into the pose, his gaze wandering to the windows. The peacocks that roamed the grounds were sunning on the gravel path, an entertaining enough sight for passing the time. By the time they had wandered off, Will was deep in thought regarding the issue of Mina, his father, and of Timothy. Eventually, though, his thoughts shifted to the future and the growing realization that he was no longer alone in his own body. It was as frightening as it was thrilling, the responsibility of it daunting but welcome. It amazed him that something could be so joyous and yet so fraught with uncertainty, even as the bleakest part of his heart questioned the fairness of bringing a child into such a world, where pain and heartache and loss loomed in their future.
But so, too, did love, and family, and days at the riverside, spring flowers and bright skies and a whole world of remarkable things that would balance out the bitterness that touched every human, from beggar to King. And one thing he was certain of, no child of theirs would ever lack for love, not as he and Hannibal had as children.

The thought made him aware of his bond, the bubbling delight fading to feed him curiosity and dismay, as if Chiyoh spoke of things that Hannibal found unsettling.

“My Lord? Does something trouble you?” Mr. Gray asked, pausing in his work. When Will’s blue eyes flicked to his, he said, “You’re frowning.”

“I beg your pardon, I was lost in thought,” Will said, surprised by how much time had passed.

“We should stop there for today,” Mr. Gray said, swirling his brushes in a little jar of water. “His Grace warned me not to tire you.”

Will shifted, his body stiff from holding the pose so long, and slid to his feet with a stretch, smiling when Winston did the same, only with a healthy yawn full of sharp teeth. He approached the canvas, seeing the faint sketch filled in with base colors, small dabs along the outside edges a mysterious code. It was already taking shape, an impression of himself he recognized on the canvas.

“Will you recreate the miniature from this one?” Will asked, concerned that he saw no trace of it.

“I will, m’Lord,” he was told. “I can finish the small portrait in a few hour’s time in my studio, so you needn’t worry his Lordship will see it. If you’ll bring the watch or locket, I’ll fit it and be certain I have the sizing right.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gray, that would be lovely,” Will said, admiring the work even in its early stages. “You are very talented. I have always admired your portrait of His Grace.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Mr. Gray said, rapidly packing his things. “I prefer murals to portraits, but the commission was too tempting to resist.”

Will smiled, laughing softly and saying, “I imagine so, and Grandfather is a difficult man to say no to.”

Mr. Gray chuckled at that, no doubt very well acquainted with how difficult Grandfather could be.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Gray,” Will said. “I’ll have Mr. Hawkes see you out when you’re ready. Please, when you wish to continue, send word and I will arrange my schedule.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Mr. Gray said, the words following Will as he slipped from the room.

Mr. Hawkes, ever attentive, perked up when he saw Will, and Will told him, “Please assist Mr. Gray, if you will, Mr. Hawkes. I am going down to the stables to visit our new guests.” He patted his pocket, adding, “And I am taking Winston, a pistol, and at least two of Hannibal’s guards with me, so you needn’t worry.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes told him, his sonorous tones deep enough to rival any Alpha, “Though I shall do so despite your assurances.”

Will grinned, gesturing to bring Winston to him, and headed out to gather his guards.

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Chiyoh spoke to Hannibal of Cyrus, how he came to that distant Court in the ravages of grief, wearing the face of a man Murasaki had long ago declared her mortal enemy. She laid her plans and drew him in like a spider in a web, softening his despair, comforting him when he wept through the night and lost himself in substances Hannibal knew dealt disaster for any who dared use them. A broken shell, Chiyoh called him, with cracks Murasaki tried to fill long enough to take her revenge, though for what reason Chiyoh refused to say. The riches she had gained, her status, the place she had carved out for them on the Continent, she sacrificed it all on the altar of her vengeance. She wrapped her will around Cyrus Lecter until he finally agreed to return home, and realized why she had desired such a thing.

It was a story that carried them through their afternoon meal and all the way home back to Hartford Town, the details of which he desperately hoped he could later recall to Will.
“The rest is something you should read for yourself,” Chiyoh told him, smoothing her dusty clothing, her face taut and cautiously neutral. Residents of Hartford Town bustled around them, curious and affable, but largely giving Hannibal wide berth. “I can only say so much before I must say it all.”

“I appreciate what you’ve told me, Chiyoh,” Hannibal said, a sad smile curving his lips. “Please... will you stay? Just a little while longer?”

She considered it a long moment before she nodded, flooding him with relief, her dark eyes tracking him as he mounted his horse to leave.

“Hannibal.”

He turned his horse, surprised when she came close to lay her hand on the bridle, looking up at him with strain heavy on her smooth face.

“It is a strange thing, being a man,” Chiyoh slowly said after a long moment, her eyes holding his. “Women and Omegas can know who their children belong to, but men can only trust. Your father was never one to trust.”

“Did he have reason not to?” Hannibal asked, holding his stallion in check as it shifted, restless.

“You will read something in her journal, Hannibal,” she said, her words gaining force with her concern for him. “Something your father believed, something Lady Murasaki wrote of in passing, but when you ask why he was cruel, it is the only answer I can give you.”

“And what is that, Chiyoh?” Hannibal asked, heart pounding with sudden nerves.

“He did not believe that he was your father, Hannibal,” Chiyoh whispered, swallowing hard, “but that his father was.”

Randall Tier’s girls were relaxed and well cared for, much as Will expected, and already responding to commands outside of the tongue they had been trained to. Athena and her wriggling puppies delighted both Will and Winston, and he spent a good hour petting them and fussing over them all with Peter.

“T-they’re very gentle, even with the puppies,” Peter said, stroking the broad, handsome heads of Randall’s girls, one after the other. “I-I think it would be safe to let them loose before too much longer.”

“I trust your judgment, Peter,” Will said, glad to hear it. “I would love to have them join me up at the House—”

He cut off abruptly, sudden dismay and shock blooming through the bond with worrisome strength. He pressed his hand to his heart, paling, and Peter asked with trembling alarm, “My Lord? S-should I call for someone?”

Winston barked, agitated, pacing between Will and the stable door.

“No, Peter, thank you,” Will said, shaking his head. “I’ll come visit again soon, I promise.”

Peter nodded, watching him anxiously as Will strode from the barn with Winston trotting next to him, the watchful men rousing from their places to escort him back up to the House.

Will crested the rise just as Hannibal dismounted, flinging himself from the neighing horse with his face set in grim lines, his long legs moving swiftly, his coat billowing out behind him. He looked furious, but all Will’s bond gave him was wrenching hurt and disbelief.

Will hurried his step and followed him inside, not surprised when Hannibal headed straight for Grandfather’s suite, though it did surprise him that Hannibal didn’t acknowledge Winston when the dog raced up to his side. Will followed in his wake, silent and watchful, wondering just what in the world could have been said to disturb his husband so deeply.

Distress dulled Hannibal’s senses and anger made him short when he barged into Grandfather’s suite, surprising Zeller.

“Hannibal? What on earth are you doing?” Grandfather asked, turning his chair from his desk, his spectacles sliding down his nose. “Where are your manners?”
“I need to speak with my grandfather,” Hannibal snapped at Zeller, who bristled and moved ever so slightly further into the space that separated the two Alphas. “Alone.”

“He’s tired,” Zeller said, making no move to hide his annoyance. “Come back later.”

“Zeller,” Roland scolded.

“I wish to speak with my grandfather alone,” Hannibal repeated, taking a step closer to Roland’s valet. “Or would you prefer I speak of Garret Jacob Hobbs?”

Zeller tipped his head up, annoyed, and said, “You’re as bad as he is. You know that, right?”

“Oh, not quite as bad, I should think,” Hannibal said, shifting his gaze to Roland. “I certainly have never slept with my son’s wife.”

“Go,” Roland said, pointing at the door with a hand that trembled. “I will handle this, Zeller.”

Zeller hesitated, torn between standing as a buffer and obeying, and obedience had never been his strong point. After a long, strained silence, he finally moved to the door and closed it behind him.

Roland watched Hannibal pace, braced for his grandson’s infamous temper and ready to match it with his own, but unwilling to make the first strike against the child he cared for so deeply. Instead, he said, “What is the meaning of this? Hm? Where did you hear something so preposterous?”

“Is it true?” Hannibal asked, checking his step to stare at his grandfather. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” Roland asked, returning his stare, unyielding even now.

“Did he think I wasn’t his own?” Hannibal whispered, the pain of that statement almost cracking his voice. “Is that why he was so cruel to me? Is that why the two of you hated one another and fought every time you came into company?”

“Your father was sick, Hannibal,” Roland said, choosing his words carefully. “He took after his mother in that regard. The truth became as malleable to his mind as clay and he formed of it what he wished.”

“And he wished to believe that I was not his son?” Hannibal pressed. “Grandfather, tell me the truth!”

Roland stared up at him, mouth pressed in a thin, grim line.

“I can bear many things, but I cannot bear being deceived,” Hannibal whispered, swallowing hard. “If you lie to me, if you refuse to tell me, I will take Will and we will go to the Capital and we will neither of us set eyes on you again, I promise you that.”

Roland dropped his gaze, a horrified shudder running through him.

“Is it true?” Hannibal asked, the words harsh. “Is this why you’ve always favored me so? Why you fought to bring me to Hartford? Why father fought so hard to keep me from you? Because he hated you for what you’d done?”

“No! Hannibal, no!” Roland protested, shaking his head. “Your father’s behavior towards you was due to a misunderstanding, that is all! A deliberate attempt to hurt us both! And how well it worked, indeed!”

“What are you saying?” Hannibal demanded, unsatisfied by how little his grandfather was willing to part with. “That someone gave him the idea? That it is nothing more than a lie?”

Roland plucked his glasses from his face, wearily rubbing a palm over his forehead, heaving a sigh of resignation.

“I doubt very much you remember your grandmother, but ours was a bitterly unhappy marriage,” Roland said, the Alpha purr in his voice softening as he gained control of himself. “The only good that ever came of it was Grace and Cyrus. She hated me with good reason, hated that I loved another. She saw something and assumed the worst.”

“What did she see?” Hannibal pressed. “Please, Grandfather, I must know the truth! There are entirely too many secrets in this family! I cannot stand another!”

“Your mother spoke very little of our language,” Roland said, his gaze imploring Hannibal to heed him, to believe him. “Cyrus spoke very little of hers, and yet they were so enraptured by one another... Still, there were moments when she grew homesick, when she wished to speak of things unsuitable for her maid to hear, and in those times she came to me.”
Hannibal took a breath, the air forcing its way into his resisting lungs, his head swimming with mingled anger and confusion, aching with uncertainty. He knew Will would feel it, and hoped he would not disturb his little mate with the force of his responses. Even as he considered it, the edge of his hurt grew blunted, the very thought of Will enough to calm him even marginally.

“One night when Cyrus was in the Capital amusing himself, there came a terrible storm and Saule came to sit up with me,” Roland said, his voice softening as he recalled that moment. “We spoke of the storms she was used to, of her hopes for a child, of the names she would choose and the wonderful things they would do. She was... so full of life, such a delight, and so beautiful... “

“What are you saying?” Dread coiling in the pit of Hannibal’s stomach as he listened to his grandfather speak, and even still he was unsure whether to trust him. He wet his dry lips, gathered his courage, and breathed, “Are you my father?”

“I wish I could answer in a way that would give you comfort,” Roland said, dropping his hand to hold Hannibal’s hurt amber eyes with his own. “Tell you that the man who resented you from the moment of your birth is not your father, that the grandfather who fought all your life to bring you here to Hartford is truly the man who sired you...”

Hannibal trembled, holding his breath, reaching out for his mate’s hand from instinct, fingers clenching in empty air. He could feel him though, as if Will were next to him, and sensed his mate was drawing on the bond.

“No, Hannibal, I am not your father,” Roland softly said, wincing as if the admission pained him. “We fell asleep that night, the two of us, sitting up in the window seat to watch the storm. Your grandmother saw her leaving my suite that morning, she later admitted. When Saule died, she saw a chance to estrange me from our son and she took it. She told him that I had taken advantage of Saule, that I had coerced her into an affair she felt she could not refuse, that I used my position to force her into my bed and you were the result.”

Hannibal shook his head, the enormity of what had occurred sickening him to his core. His father’s resentment of him took new shape, the inexplicable animosity between Roland and Cyrus finally grounded in understanding.

“It was very clever of her,” Roland said, sorrow heavy in his voice, weighing in his eyes and the lines of his face. “He expected I would deny it as I did, and your mother could not refute it from her grave. He hated me for what he thought I had done to her. He hated you because you were a rival, not a son. The more you grew to resemble him, all he could see in you was me and what he thought I had done to Saule.”

He wheeled his chair closer to Hannibal, reaching out with hesitance to take his hand, expecting his grandson to pull away, but he didn’t.

“Your grandmother did not stop to think what the outcome would mean for you,” he whispered, folding Hannibal’s lax fingers in his own and clinging tight. “When Cyrus abandoned you with Grace and Margaret, she realized that her petty cruelty struck not only me, but also you as well as herself. She ruined my relationship with Cyrus for good, but she lost him entirely. Believe me when I say her conscience pained her even to the hour of her death.”

Hannibal flinched, childhood stories of his grandmother whispering through his mind of her unfortunate death.

“You are a Lecter, Hannibal,” Roland said, tugging on his hand until Hannibal knelt, stricken. “You are your father’s son, but I will always love you as my own. He was troubled and deeply disturbed, unhappy and plagued by discontent from the moment he was brought into this world until your mother came into his life. Never doubt that you are the result of the love they bore one another, my dear boy.”

Hannibal ducked his head, eyes closing when Grandfather smoothed his hair and placed a trembling kiss on the crown of his head, allowing himself to be drawn into the elderly Alpha’s embrace, wishing deep in his secret heart that it truly was his father who held him.

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It seemed an eternity passed before Hannibal sought him out, an eternity in which the boiling chaos of emotions wreaking havoc through the bond finally subsided to heavy regret. Will, curled up in the window seat in the library, closed his eyes and felt him approach, the pulse and tug of the bond strengthening. He’d done his best to remain calm and composed, to ease
Hannibal from afar as he had before, and had succeeded to a point. Now, however, Hannibal’s calm was entirely his own, and he came to Will in reflective silence.

Will sat up, one foot falling to touch the floor. He said nothing, only opened his arms wide in welcome.

Hannibal slipped into his embrace, bearing Will back against the sill, delving into his arms in silence. Will gathered Hannibal to him, holding him tight and purring softly to him, soothing them both. Slowly but surely, Hannibal’s breathing slowed, the pounding of his heart matching the rhythm of Will’s own, the coiled tension in his body draining away. His arms tightened just a fraction around Will’s body, but his voice was soft and thoughtful when he said, “It’s a strange feeling, isn’t it? Being afraid something is true, then being disappointed when it isn’t.”

Will stroked his hair, and after a thoughtful silence, he softly asked, “Do you want to tell me?”

“I do, but not yet,” Hannibal murmured, pressing his face into the bend of Will’s neck, breathing in his rich scent. “I just... need to hold you, Will.”

Will nuzzled him, squeezing him a little closer, and he said, “There’s something I need to tell you, Hannibal. I think it might lift your spirits.”

“If it involves my family in any way, I would prefer not to hear it just yet,” Hannibal said, his soft laugh strained.

“It does involve your family,” Will whispered, smiling, “in a way.”

Hannibal lifted his head, a bemused frown on his face.

Will smiled at him, sleepy-eyed and pink-cheeked and radiant, the lush richness of his scent filling Hannibal’s lungs, all the niggling signs he’d been so determined to ignore now given permission to converge on him.

“Will,” he said, his voice shaking, the swell of joy in his bond filling his mate with delight. “Do you mean?”

“Yes, Hannibal,” Will said, happy tears shining in his eyes as he breathed, “I’m pregnant.”

Chapter 52

If it hadn’t been for his bond, shining straight through his heart with every nuance of Hannibal’s feelings, Will might have doubted his reception of their happy news. He simply stared at Will, amber eyes wide, mouth parted with the tips of his Alpha fangs peeking beneath the firm curve of his lip. Yet in a heartbeat the smooth planes of his face transformed in a wide, delighted grin and he scooped Will into his arms, dragging his sturdy little mate into his lap as he lolléd backwards in the window seat, laughing with excitement.

Will laughed with him, arms tight around Hannibal’s neck, draped easily in his lap and breathless. He closed his eyes and clung, senses filled with his husband, doubts and fears and reservations vanishing beneath the force of Hannibal’s love for him.

“Gods, Will, do you mean it?” Hannibal asked, easing his hold on Will in a pang of worry, cupping the back of his curly head to stroke his hair.

Will nodded against his throat and tipped his head back, meeting Hannibal’s gaze, loosening his arms to lay his hand on Hannibal’s jaw.

“Yes,” he said, heart pounding with shared glee, with a joy that made him feel almost drunk, giddy with happiness. “At least, I believe so. I cannot be certain—”

“I am,” Hannibal said, drawing a trembling breath, vibrant with energy, like he could run all the way down to Hartford Town shouting to the world that his mate was with child. “I am, Will. I saw the signs plain as day but I tried not to pressure you with hope.”

He cut off, tipping his mouth to Will’s in a brief, sweet kiss, both of them half laughing, filled with bubbling delight that frothed over like champagne.

“It’s still very early,” Will said, trying in vain to curb his expectations, to prepare for the worst simply from habit. “It’s possible this is a false alarm—”
“No, never say that,” Hannibal said, kissing him again, his powerful body thrumming with happiness. “Never say that! I’m certain, Will. I should have known the moment scents started to affect you. We’re already sensitive to odors and pregnancy can only worsen that. All the signs were there, the glow you have about you, your sudden exhaustion—you’re pregnant, my love. I know you are.”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Will said, Hannibal’s surety strengthening his own. He stroked his husband’s fine hair back, marveling that a joy this encompassing could actually exist.

“Will?” Hannibal asked, sensing some change in his mate’s demeanor. “You needn’t be afraid. I know there are horror stories aplenty, but I will be with you. Nothing will happen to you, I promise.”

“No, it isn’t that,” Will said, shaking his head, uttering a soft, embarrassed laugh. “No, it’s just... a year ago we were strangers to one another. I imagined I would live forever as I was, childless, married in name only, finding solace in running the estate and resigned to what life had seen fit to grant me.”

The sadness tingeing his smile faded, the tears in his blue eyes those of relief and gratitude. “I never imagined such bliss awaited me, Hannibal. I never dreamed I would experience love like yours, that I would ever find myself carrying our child and delighting in every moment of my life instead of merely drifting through it.”

“Will,” Hannibal breathed, kissing his forehead, then his adorable nose, and finally each closed eyelid. “I promised to devote myself to your happiness...”

“You’ve kept every promise, Hannibal, tenfold,” Will said, his laughter shaky with tears but still eloquent of elation. “Just when I imagine I am as happy as I can ever be, something happens to make me even happier.”

Hannibal shifted, easing Will back down where he’d been sitting, his mate’s marvelous thighs slung over his own, his slender body without an ounce of tension as he settled against the mounded pillows in the window seat. Hannibal eased over him, one arm braced on the seat, his free hand combing through Will’s silky curls, a dazed smile on his face when Will began to softly purr, turning his lips against Hannibal’s wrist to kiss his tender skin.

He knew what he was feeling must be apparent through the bond, must be affecting or even overwhelming what Will himself felt about things, but he couldn’t prevent it, couldn’t clamp down on this exhilaration and he truly didn’t want to. He was thrilled beyond his capacity to truly grasp, the concept of fatherhood suddenly real in the best possible ways, and he would gladly share his excitement.

“We’re going to have a baby,” he whispered, dropping his hand to Will’s belly, awe shading ever word. Tears spilled over on a delighted laugh and a tremble moved through his taut body. “We’re going to be fathers!”

“We are,” Will whispered back, laughing when Hannibal laid his head over his stomach, ear pressed to him as if he could hear the baby within, the heat of his tears seeping through Will’s waistcoat and blouse to dampen his skin. He grinned as Hannibal began to purr, a low, echoing rumble of sound that vibrated through his bones in a pleasant pulse. His instincts, so blunted and pruned and questioned for so many years, responded instantly to that claiming call. He answered Hannibal’s purr with his own, the melody of their happiness a lullaby to a baby yet unformed, calling to them in the comforting darkness of Will’s womb.

“Are you comfortable in there?” Hannibal whispered, much to Will’s amusement. He rubbed his cheek against Will’s belly, knowing his joy rendered him foolish, but he was simply too happy to care. “If you promise to come out safe and sound, then I promise I will spoil you intolerably. Even if your mother threatens me with a trout—”

“Hannibal!” Will said, surprised into more laughter. The strength of his happiness sought escape in laughter, in tears, too great to be contained in fragile flesh, needing to be cast out into a dreary world and make it brighter with shared elation.

“Don’t let him fool you, he is very strong for such a delicate little Omega,” Hannibal whispered, rolling his eyes up to Will’s to enjoy his reaction. “No doubt I will be coshed silly by the time you arrive, but it will be worth it. My darling little one, it will be worth every moment.”

Will ruffled his fingers through Hannibal’s hair, grinning, just listening to his husband whisper encouragement against his belly, the rhythm of their purring slowly fading to contentment.
Hannibal lifted his head, a light flush brushing over his cheeks as he said, “We’ll have to get the nursery ready.”

“You,” Hannibal, I think we have some time—“

“The baby will need clothing! You will need clothing!” Hannibal said, growing more excited as he spoke. “We must go to the Capital immediately. No, you shouldn’t travel in your state, I will send for them.”

“Hannibal,” Will said, invigorated by his enthusiasm. “Hannibal!”

His husband paused, his bright, gleaming eyes wide, fearless in his celebration in ways Will envied. He softened his voice and chided him, “There’s time, Hannibal. We needn’t do it all at once, and I’m perfectly capable of traveling! Don’t think to shut me up inside throughout my pregnancy or I will cosh you! I promise!”

“We must tell Grandfather,” Hannibal said, immediately diverted in another direction in his excitement.

“So soon?” Will questioned, worried. “Shouldn’t we wait until we’re positive?”

“When is that? At the birth?” Hannibal teased, leaning in close to kiss Will breathless, his palm rubbing Will’s belly again, tender and gentle. “My very wise, very cautious husband has pointed out that I am an impulsive, determined man prone to making rash decisions. As I have no wish to disappoint his estimation of me, I must insist we tell Grandfather immediately. It will do him as much good as it’s done me.”

Will cocked his head, covering Hannibal’s hand on his stomach with his own.

“Will you tell me?” he asked, knowing something momentous had happened. He hesitated to ask for fear of ruining Hannibal’s good mood, but his husband was far too elated to be bothered by much and merely shook his head.

“I will,” he said, sitting up straight to smile at Will. “Later, Will. Right now, I want to think only of my wondrous mate and how small and delicate he is.”

“And perfect?” Will teased, pushing himself up to sit, shifting his shapely leg over Hannibal’s hip and grasping his hand to rub his chin over Hannibal’s fingertips. “And beautiful?”

“Only a fool would say otherwise,” Hannibal purred, attempting to wink at him.

“Were you a fool, then, Hannibal?” Will asked, leaning closer to breathe the words against his lips.

“One, but now I am a reformed one,” Hannibal murmured, smiling as their lips brushed with each word. “Very happily reformed, as it were... Now, let me take you upstairs and examine you, hm? And after I’m done playing the doctor, it can be your turn.”

Roland was up in the study, looking rather stronger than he had earlier that morning, though hollow and spare in a way that made Will very glad of Hannibal’s insistence they share their news. The worry of speaking out prematurely of his pregnancy was outweighed by the relief of seeing the old Alpha’s face light up when he said, “I believe I am with child, Grandfather.”

Hannibal’s hand was warm in his, sure and strong, even as he quivered at Will’s side, ready to burst with joy. But Roland’s excited laughter opened the way for their own and he threw his arms wide, gesturing Will to him for an embrace, dragging both of his precious grandchildren to him to hold them tight.

“My darling children! You have made me so happy!” he cried, his nose reddening and his eyes shiny with tears. “Were I to die this instant, I could do so with a peaceful heart!”

“Grandfather, you mustn’t talk that way,” Hannibal said, wiping at his own eyes. Every moment seemed to hit him with renewed force, the understanding that he was finally to be a father in truth flooding him over and again with renewed surprise. It would be a very long time before they would finally welcome their little one into their arms, but the world was remade with the knowledge that they existed, and he found his purpose redefined with determination that Will and their children would lack for nothing.
“Oh, but you must have the nursery redone!” Roland said, his course of thought following Hannibal’s almost precisely. His thin, pale hand trembled as he gestured, saying, “I will send to the village at once! New paper, new everything! Ah! Mr. Hawkes, call for Mrs. Henderson!”

“Your Grace, that really isn’t necessary,” Will said, embarrassed by the attention, but able to relish it now where before he would’ve hidden himself away, horrified.

“We’ll send for the finest cloth,” Grandfather said, clapping his hands again, his grin the mirror image of Hannibal’s own. “The baby must have the best of everything! Mr. Avery can have a seamstress get started right away!”

“I would prefer to sew it myself,” Will said, firm. “As much as I can, but I would be grateful for someone to refresh my memory. It’s been a very long time since I’ve used a needle for anything other than making lures.”

His laughter was only a little self-conscious, the shift from anticipation to doubt so fast and so subtle it surprised him. Sensing it, Hannibal slipped his arm around Will’s back, tucking close to his side in a wordless display of support. It was gone as quickly as it came and Will’s bright smile returned, rivaling his own.

“We’ll get all that settled as we go,” Hannibal said, beaming and proud. “We just wanted you to be the first to know, Grandfather.”

“Yes,” Will said, his smile regaining its strength. “It’s very early, I know, but we will do everything we can for a good outcome.”

“Oh, my dear, there can only be a good outcome!” Roland said, dabbing at his eyes with his handkerchief. “You have made me the happiest man in the world today, and that is no small thing! I only hope I live long enough to hold them!”

Their excitement was infectious, wreathing the staff in smiles, and Mr. Hawkes sniffled valiantly while Mrs. Henderson blinked back tears, absolutely thrilled for them. Immediate plans were laid to have the nursery aired and cleaned, as it had sat empty these many long years.

“I will have the girls get started right away!” Mrs. Henderson said, her hand falling to the keys on her belt.

“I will join you,” Hannibal said, eager to have a look. “Shall we, Will?”

“I’ll be there shortly,” Will said, aware that he was stroking his belly, but no one looked strangely at him, no one seemed to mind. If anything, both Alphas looked so pleased with themselves he almost smiled. “I’m going to arrange things with Mina for her departure. It might take a bit of time, depending on how well she takes it.”

“That’s quite alright,” Hannibal said. “I’d rather you avoid it when the dust is flying anyway. Hopefully it will be properly tended to before you come up.”

Mrs. Henderson and Mr. Hawkes hurried out to arrange things, eager to get started.

“Will we see you at dinner, Grandfather?” Hannibal asked, hopeful.

Perhaps,” Roland said, pushing up in his chair with a wince. “I will do my best, but it has been a very trying day.”

“Don’t exhaust yourself,” Will said, angling a fond, concerned look his way. “We’ll see ourselves out, Grandfather. You get some rest.”

Zeller was nowhere around, predictably, so they were alone as they emerged from the study, walking slowly towards the stairs.

“Will... it was thoughtless of me not to ask before, but how do you feel about this?” Hannibal asked, his amber eyes searching Will’s face, anxious and earnest. They came to a stop at the foot of the stairs, reluctant to part company. “I know you’re happy, I can see that and you’ve said as much, but just now with Grandfather you seemed... uncertain.”

“Did I?” Will asked, trying to order his thoughts to answer.

“It’s daunting, isn’t it? You have a life growing within you, a life we’ll be responsible for as long as we live,” Hannibal softly said, pitching his voice low. “You have many roles to play in your life—mother to our children, Lord Clarges, Duke of Westvale eventually, husband, lover, occasional menace armed with trout, spoons, and knees I would gladly wage war for...”
He sighed, happy and content, slipping two fingers beneath Will’s chin to rub along his jawline, proud and firm as it was.

“All that aside, to me, Will,” he murmured, too overcome for a moment to speak, his bond saying everything his words never could, “to me you will always be you—unpredictable, entrancing, and wise beyond your years. Neither a man, nor a woman, but only yourself, utterly and entirely the most precious person in the world and the treasure I will always be greedy for.”

Will swallowed hard, seeking shelter from the strength of his emotions by teasing, “I would’ve coshed you senseless for that a year ago”

“Yes, I know,” Hannibal laughed, and asked, “And what about now?”

“Well, since I haven’t been locked in a room with you and insulted, I can hardly justify putting the valuables at risk,” Will said, eyes sparkling with humor. “I suppose you’ll have to settle for a kiss.”

“Settle?” Hannibal echoed, brows rising in surprise, “What a fortunate man I am, hm?”

Will shivered when Hannibal bent to claim his lips in a kiss. It deepened with heat that surprised them both, sudden desire gripping Will, instantly rousing his mate’s interest. They both were panting softly when they parted, lips brushing with every breath, eager and surprised.

“Perhaps we should sneak back up to my suite, instead?” Hannibal breathed, nuzzling his nose to Will’s and capturing his lower lip in a soft, teasing bite.

“Mmm, tempting, but duty calls,” Will sighed, reluctant. Part of him knew this sudden need to indulge in one another was simply due to newlywed syndrome, late as it was in coming, but something in him warned that they would always be so enraptured in one another, that even if passion eventually were to fade, this drive to be together would linger for the length of their lives... and beyond, perhaps, though only the gods knew for sure.

Hannibal pulled away from him, but his amber eyes were filled with promise and Will’s skin prickled in response, tightening with anticipation that was almost as pleasurable as any touch.

“Soon,” he whispered, and left Will with a parting kiss.

Will wearily hoped his sister would be willing to discuss possible arrangements for her departure without argument. He was too content and happy to be faced with the degree of unpleasantness she could so easily manage and wasn’t sure if he could hold his tongue if she grew testy with him.

“Will! Darling,” she cried, rising to meet him the moment he crossed the threshold into her room. Her hands landed on his shoulders, light as butterflies, all traces of her former upset vanished like clouds after a storm. “What a pleasant surprise this is! I wasn’t sure he’d ever let you come to me again!”

“I’m sorry?” Will asked, bewildered as she led him to sit. He grimaced when he saw the teapot, hoping she hadn’t asked for her usual brew. “He who, Mina?”

“Why, your dreadful husband, of course,” she said, settling next to him and tugging his hand into her lap, tracing the swirls and whorls of his ring with her fingertips. “After appearing before His Grace as I did, I was certain Hannibal would toss me from the house!”

“Mina, no,” Will said, not about to tell her how close to the truth she was.

“That’s right, Hartford is still yours... for now,” she said, her smile brief and tight. She refused to meet his gaze as she turned to the little teapot, a beautiful set Will recognized as the one preferred by Roland’s late wife.

“I hope it isn’t that bitter tea you favor,” Will ventured, nose wrinkling and stomach giving a preemptive warning that it would stand for no such thing.
“No, darling, I was told it did not agree with you,” she said, pouring for them both with trembling hands. She added sugar to Will’s, a heaping spoonful that raised his eyebrows. She stirred it, her movements small and dainty, and laid the little spoon aside to offer Will his cup. “A bit of sugar to help, hm?”

“Thank you,” he said, unwilling to quibble with her over sugar, merely grateful not to be confronted with that awful tea. He took a sip, surprised to find it the perfect sweetness, and settled the cup into its saucer, his watchful blue eyes on his sister. Her slender body was taut, tight, her full mouth held pursed in a way he was unaccustomed to seeing. Her tension plucked at his nerves, prompting him to ask, “Is something on your mind, Mina?”

“What a strange thing to say! I was about to ask you the same thing,” she told him, taking her tea plain, though she did not drink it. “You came to visit me, Will.”

“You just seem preoccupied,” Will said, perplexed by how nervous she seemed. “Mina, if you’ll confide in me, I will happily advise you. Any way I can help—”

“What on earth has gotten into Hannibal?” Mina asked, bypassing the question. “Gretchen said he’s grinning from ear to ear, as if he’d single-handedly won the war. The staff are all abuzz, though they don’t speak to her of anything, dreadful people.”

Will blushed, a helpless smile on his lips.

“I hesitate to say, but I suppose there is no harm in it now,” he told her. “We’re to have a baby, Mina. I’m pregnant.”

She stared at him, cocking her head as if weighing his words against potential teasing.

“Pregnant?” she echoed, her blue eyes dropping to his belly. “How long?”

“Not very,” Will said, dropping a protective hand to shield himself from her piercing gaze. “No more than a fortnight, for certain. I thought I was reacting badly to the loss of my suppressants, but it turns out Omegan and Alpha sensitivity to scent changes rather rapidly following conception. There are other signs, of course, but that is the most obvious and reliable early indicator. We really have no other way to tell so early.”

“No,” she said, her voice soft and absent. “You really don’t.”

“He’s quite pleased,” Will said, lifting the cup to his lips, “as am I—Mina!”

He was shocked when she snatched the cup from his hand, sloshing tea over her fingers.

“What on earth?” he asked, confused when she put the cup down and mopped at the mess with a napkin. “What did you do that for?”

“I was afraid for your baby,” she said, plucking up a fresh napkin to blot at the drops of tea on his sleeve. “Who knows what tea does to infants?”

“We know,” Will said, confounded. “Mina, everyone drinks tea, where on earth do you imagine we live? Of course it’s safe.”

“Gretchen!” she called, ignoring his assurances. When Ms. Speck peeked out from the dressing room, Mina instructed her, “Take this away, please.”

“Mina, honestly,” Will said, uncertain whether to be touched or annoyed.

“You asked if there was something on my mind, and in truth there is,” she said, overriding his protests, pasting a smile on her face that he saw right through, “I wanted to tell you that I’m leaving Hartford, Will.”

“Leaving? For where?” Will asked, disappointed to hear her say so, yet relieved all the same that he would not have to dance around her sensitive pride on the matter.

“I am going to Broadriver to stay with father,” she said, smoothing her skirt. “From there, I am going to stay with Ingrid. She’s been ill recently, and she wrote to invite me to keep her company while she convalesces.”
It bothered Will to hear her speak of their sister so easily, to hear of letters exchanged when he had none from any of them, but he drew a calming breath and softly said, “That will be very nice for both of you, Mina. I am pleased to hear that she has asked you. Do... do send her my regards, if you would.”

“Of course, my darling,” Mina said, stroking his cheek. “You understand, Will, don’t you? I couldn’t stay here a moment longer with those Lecter men judging me, watching me constantly as if I am nothing more than a common criminal!”

“Mina, it was not that at all,” Will said, mild reproach in his tone.

“Well, it feels like that,” she informed him, dropping her hand. “As much as I care about you, I cannot stay under such suspicion. I will have to trust your judgment and hope that you are as safe here as you imagine yourself to be, especially now that you have a child to consider.”

Will’s hand pressed harder over his belly, fingers smoothing the fine material of his waistcoat.

“I’ll be praying every moment that it is not Omegan,” Mina said, her blue eyes gauging his reactions. “After all, he did say he would feel compelled to drown it, did he not? And the law is always on the side of men, even when a child’s life is at stake.”

“Mina, he would never do such a thing and I wish you would not repeat such hateful words,” Will said, brows slamming down in a frown.

“His words, you mean?” she pressed. “Very well, I will hold my tongue and pray silently for your sake. I only hope he is genuine in his affections, Will, and not simply... giving you what you wish to see.”

“He would not,” Will softly said, gently reminding her, “he cannot.”

Mina blinked, thoughts moiling in her dark eyes.

“Off you go,” she said, surging to her feet. “I must oversee my packing. I’ll say my goodbyes, of course, but only in private and only to you.”

“Mina,” Will said, trailing off because he knew it was no use arguing with her. Resigned, he gained his feet and embraced her, whispering, “I love you, Mina. I only wish I could help you with whatever it is that has you so nervous.”

“Just bring that child safely into the world, Will,” Mina crooned, her slender arms squeezing him briefly. “That is the very best thing you could ever do to help me.”

Word of Will’s pregnancy quickly spread, hastened by their ride into Hartford Town to engage craftsmen for the nursery. The House nursery was a gorgeous, spacious room a floor up from the family suites, the doors opening onto the night nursery, the nanny’s apartment, and outdated washrooms Will took immediate note of. Between the foreman up to take notes on their instructions and the elated staff, everyone in the area soon knew that the Lecter household was preparing for a new baby.

“I think we should consider converting the house to gas while we’re at it,” Will said much later once he’d joined Hannibal in his bed. He preferred to sleep in his husband’s suite, surrounded by his earthy scent. It gave him a sense of security still new enough to be precious to him and he needed that comfort, though he would be hard pressed to admit it. “Mr. Wells has written that Marsham is much more pleasant now that the renovations have been completed. I would love to go stay again now that the rail has cut the travel time.”

“Mr. Landry mentioned gas, and the city council has a proposal on the table for public works,” Hannibal said, sliding into the bed at his side and gently tugging Will’s spectacles off. He pulled the various letters from Will’s lap and hands, tidied them, and set them aside. “We could attend and hear their plans. Perhaps we could cover the costs of piping and plumbing the city in exchange for our gas supply?”

“And you call me clever,” Will chuckled, turning to curl sideways facing Hannibal, sighing when his husband echoed him, reaching out to rub his belly through his fine nightshirt. “Jimmy said Mina left while we were in town... she told me she would say goodbye, but she didn’t.”
“I’m sorry she hurt your feelings, but I cannot be sorry to see her go, Will,” Hannibal said, tugging the material up and over until he could flatten his palm to Will’s bare belly. “Too many strange things occurred while she was in this house. Correspondence being tampered with, things vanishing, _people_ vanishing.”

“Mina had nothing to do with Matthew Brown’s disappearance,” Will said, his tone warning Hannibal not to push the point. “It is strange, isn’t it? It’s as if he dropped from the face of the earth. It’s frightening to think that could happen to someone. I find myself imagining he is found with his throat cut and it horrifies me.”

He shuddered, squeezing his eyes closed and shaking his head to rid himself of the terrible image.

“He’ll turn up,” Hannibal said, hoping to distract him from such a morbid turn of mind. “No doubt he’s on the Continent somewhere. Mr. Tier would have found him for us in an instant, were he still alive. At least then we could assure him we do not suspect his complicity.”

Tier’s girls, bedded down before the banked fire with Winston across from them, raised their noble heads at the mention of their master’s name and Hannibal murmured a soft command to them, easing their sudden interest. They were on edge and watchful in strange new surroundings, but infinitely patient with their new circumstances.

“Young Aunt Aldona said you would be happy to teach me your mother’s tongue,” Will said, distracted by the dogs and happy to leave the gruesome subject behind him. “But she said it might not be useful outside of the bedchamber.”

“Nonsense!” Hannibal said, affronted. “Why, phrases such as ‘faster’, ‘more’, and ‘please’ will always be useful, in or out of one’s bed!”

He grinned at Will’s throaty laughter, still rubbing his belly, and said, “Of course I will teach you. They are good, obedient dogs but they cannot listen if they cannot understand you.”

Will cocked his head, covering Hannibal’s hand with his own, urging him to keep rubbing his belly. “You’re already such a wonderful father, Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s smile widened, but beneath the preening Alpha pride was a doubt Will could see with his tender heart, and he said, “You are loving and gentle and kind, and they will think you hung the moon and stars. I’m certain of it.”

“I wish it was,” Hannibal admitted, tipping his forehead to rest against Will’s, the rub of his hand slowing, thoughtful and soft. “I think of my father and I wonder how much of him will manifest in me. I’ve already proven that I can be cruel, that even unprovoked I’m inclined to be vicious when crossed... Grandfather said my father was jealous of me from the moment my mother was with child... I cannot imagine such a thing, myself as brutal and cold as he was, but I fear it.”

“That you even fear it is proof you would never follow in your father’s footsteps,” Will assured him. “No more than I will follow in _my_ father’s footsteps.”

After a long, contemplative moment, Hannibal said, “He thought Grandfather had sired me.”

Will stilled for a moment, surprised, and Hannibal’s amber eyes flicked to his. “Lady Murasaki wrote of it in her journal. Chiyoh wished to warn me, and when I asked her why father was so cruel to me, she said that was the only reason she could give.”

“What a terrible thing to think!” Will breathed, horrified. “Why would he think something so disturbing?”

“I think we should put out that lamp,” Hannibal said, the words careful and slow, accompanied by a faint smile, “and you should lie back and relax, and I will tell you what Grandfather and I spoke of.”

“Are you certain?” Will asked, his curiosity getting the better of him despite his concern for Hannibal’s comfort.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, his smile regaining its brilliance. “This family keeps too many secrets, Will. Starting with the four of us, we’re putting an end to it.”

“ _Four_ of us?” Will questioned, turning to put the lamp out, plunging them into fire-lit darkness. “It isn’t kind of you to leave Winston out of the count!”
“I have never left Winston out of anything, including his occasional forays into an occupied bathtub,” Hannibal reminded him, angling a look at Winston, who covered his snout with his paw as if scolded. “I mean the two of us and the children you carry.”

“Children?” Will squeaked, and dissolved into gleeful laughter when Hannibal dragged him down into his arms.

Life in the countryside moved along at an unhurried pace, each day bringing Will more awareness of the life within him and how deeply grateful he was for what he had. Chiyoh returned to the Capital not long after news of Garret Jacob Hobbs' execution reached them. She took with her the enamel box, her payment, and Lady Murasaki’s journal. She’d been overcome when Hannibal insisted she take it, and promised to return for another visit after the baby was born. In all the excitement, the translation was left safely locked in Will’s jewelry box where it could do no harm for the moment. It seemed full of sorrows that neither of them could bear to explore, not when life was being so generous with them.

Mr. Buddish sent word that Abigail was safely settled with the Fosters and eager to see them again, mentioning a certain hat and a walk Will had yet to claim. He also wrote of the investigation into Will’s accidents, which had stalled for lack of leads. There was no word of Francis Dolarhyde, nor of Mason Verger, and every attempt by Mr. Buddish to strike a deal with Mr. Verger senior was met with stony refusal.

‘He is,’ Mr. Buddish noted, ‘the most spiteful creature I have ever had the misfortune to meet, and nothing I have offered—including a pardon—can persuade him to divulge any details regarding his son, Lord Rathmore, or Lord Reddig.’

The investigation into Lord Rathmore gained momentum quietly from necessity, but no unpleasantness ever tainted Hartford House. Will was even more busy as Lord Clarges than he’d been as Mr. Graham, much to his satisfaction. He hadn’t a moment to catch his breath between preparations for their child, lending his expertise to Mr. Landry, trips to the Capital and Marsham Heath, visits with family, attending engagements, and arranging the construction of a building for Hannibal’s Hartford practice.

It seemed his life couldn’t get more perfect, and he used every ounce of his willpower to ignore the whispering, gloating remnant of his father’s voice warning him that the gods only let one rise to see them fall that much further.

Will woke one morning to an unusual occurrence, namely that his husband was not next to him. Most mornings found Will struggling to extricate himself from his overprotective Alpha mate, something which took more effort as his belly began to swell.

It was strangely unsettling not to have Hannibal near. As much as Will scolded Hannibal for smothering him in solicitous zeal, he took great comfort and delight in his mate’s obvious need to care for him and their growing child.

“He won’t have gone far,” he mused, stretching and yawning, Winston giving a sleepy grunt at his feet. He scanned the room quickly but saw no signs of Tier's girls, neither of whom responded to the names given to them and remained “Tier's girls” despite Will’s best efforts.

He managed to sit up, groggy and warm and blinking in the strong sunlight. The dome of his belly pushed against his nightshirt and Will smoothed his hand over it, smiling as he revisited Hannibal murmuring endearments against his skin the night before, as he did at every available opportunity.

“You certainly seem comfortable enough,” he said to them, and Winston lifted his head, ears perked. “When will you start kicking, hm? Your father and I are getting anxious.”

Winston yipped, skittering off of the bed to greet Jimmy when he came in, wheeling the little service cart before him.

“Good morning, my Lord! Did you sleep well?” he asked, moving help Will sit up even though he was perfectly able. Still, the staff enjoyed babying him and Will hadn’t the heart to refuse their indulgence.

“Like a dream, Jimmy,” Will said, blushing a little over the state of the bedclothes. The round firmness of his growing belly hadn’t dimmed Hannibal’s delight in him one bit. If anything, he seemed even more enticed by Will’s state than he’d been
before, tenderly loving him into exhausted slumber despite Will’s inability to tie his knot these days. “Have you seen Hannibal?”

“He left this for you,” Jimmy said, retrieving a note from his jacket. Will unfolded it, vaguely aware of his delighted valet fetching something from the hallway.

Will,

I hope you slept well and have risen to find the morning all you could ever ask for. We have been meeting ourselves coming and going of late and I find that I crave some quiet time with my beautiful spouse. Please meet me downstairs after you finish your breakfast.

Love always and forever,

Hannibal

“He’s certainly in fine form,” Will said, lowering the note with a soft gasp, his eyes lighting up when he saw the huge bouquet Jimmy had brought in. “What on earth! Did he ask for these?”

“He did,” Jimmy said, arranging them on the small table before the window where the sun caught and glimmered in the cut crystal vase. Looped around the vase and threaded through the blooms were ropes of jewelry which Jimmy pointed out, saying, “And I believe those are more pearls. He certainly does enjoy the sight of you in pearls, doesn’t he?”

“More than you could possibly know,” Will said, hoping his florid blush wasn’t giving him away and figuring it probably was. He ate his delicious breakfast right there on the edge of the bed, admiring the beautiful flowers and the sweet fragrance he could enjoy now that his scent sensitivity had passed.

Jimmy helped him bathe, unwilling to leave him alone with a slippery floor and tub for even an instant, and got him dressed, groomed, and presentable with admirable speed. Within the hour, Will was moving carefully down the stairs with Winston trotting at his side, his blue eyes scanning the House for signs of his husband’s presence.

He caught his scent at the foot of the stairs, faint and enticing, and tipped his nose in search of more.

“Ah! Lord Clarges! Good morning to you,” Mr. Hawkes said, approaching from the direction of Grandfather’s suite. “Are you looking for his Lordship?”

“I am,” Will said, amused by how cagey the aging butler seemed, as if he was privy to a secret he longed to share. “How is Grandfather?”

“Still abed, my Lord, but Mr. Zeller is taking him his breakfast as we speak,” Mr. Hawkes said, a faint smile daring to reach his lips. “I believe I saw his Lordship heading towards the drawing room, my Lord.”

“Indeed? Well, I hope I will find him there,” Will said, certain that something was afoot. “Did he have the girls with him?”

“He did, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, waiting with stiff dignity to admit Will to the drawing room.

The door opened onto the sunlit room, and Winston zipped past Will to sniff around a table very obviously out of place in the center of the room.

Will’s grin was instant and unstoppable as he approached, running his fingers over the watertight wooden box engraved with leaping trout and roiling rivers. A brand new net lay propped behind it along with two new fishing poles.

“Heavens, what is all of this for?” Will wondered, opening the box to find hooks and sinkers and all manner of fishing gear neatly separated out. “How beautiful! I would hate to take this to the riverside and spoil it.”

There was a note, of course, and he eagerly picked it up, breaking it open to read, ‘If you are to cosh me silly, you will need to catch some trout. I know you will make good use of my gifts, my love.’

“Mr. Hawkes!” Will called, holding the folded paper to his nose and drawing the scent of Hannibal’s skin deep into his lungs. “His Lordship has gone.”

“How very curious, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, his air of surprise convincing. “Perhaps he has gone to the library?”

“Perhaps so,” Will said, grinning. He slid the note into his jacket pocket and patted it, enjoying their impromptu game. “Could you be sure his gifts are stored appropriately for me? I will want to use them at my earliest convenience.”
“I will see to it immediately,” Mr. Hawkes promised, moving to fetch more staff as Will and Winston headed towards the library.

Hannibal, unsurprisingly, wasn’t there either. There was, however, another gathering of gifts, much to Will’s delight. He had no idea what had inspired Hannibal’s excess, but the intent behind it left him breathless. The bond brimmed with excitement, and he knew his husband relished anticipating his responses. Will wished he could share his own surprise and delight through the proper bond they should have formed, but the thought was fleeting. He gazed with disbelief at his gifts, touched by Hannibal’s thoughtfulness.

The gold confetti he’d taken from the Masquerade ball was displayed in a gilt frame, rescued from his pocket by Jimmy and held in safety for this moment. The masks they had worn were on stands flanking it, the stag and wolf beautiful sentinels overlooking a figurine. It sat before the frame, its shape that of two masked dancers, one stag and one wolf. Will gently turned the couple on their base, gasping when the tinkling strains of their first waltz rang out from a hidden music box.

Will turned them as far as they would go and stepped back to watch them slowly spin. The scent of perfume and spilled champagne and warm bodies and cold, foggy night air wrapped around him in sense memory, heavy beneath Hannibal’s rich Alpha scent. He felt the pressure of Hannibal’s hand in his, the supple grace of his body as Hannibal led him through that waltz. They’d danced and they’d kissed beneath the moonlight, returned to Chelsea House to watch the dawn. They’d spoken of dangerous knees and garters, of rivers and loss and Lady Murasaki in a night that had been spun of glittering stars and magic. It was one of best nights of Will’s life in a long string of beautiful nights, cherished for the pleasure it had brought them both.

‘What an interesting quandary we have… a stag is hunting, and his prey is a Wolf…’

Will wiped at his cheeks, a soft laugh escaping him when Winston licked his other hand, whining in concern.

“It’s so beautiful,” he whispered, resisting the urge to crank the music box again as the song slowed to a stop. A folded note was half beneath the base and Will fished it free, wiping impatiently at his face and trying to pull himself together.

‘The day of our first kiss became the night of our first waltz, but certainly not our last. When age slows us and time steals our vigor, we will still be waltzing, you and I, always and forever, Will.’

“Gracious,” Will breathed, tucking the note into his jacket pocket along with the other, wiping once more at his face to chase a stray tear away. “He is determined to seduce me! I hope he doesn’t ambush me with an unbuttoned shirt. If he’s attempting to sway me towards something, I’m not certain I could resist.”

Winston whined, uttering a grumbling thought on that count which Will happily paid no mind to. Instead, he focused on the pull of his bond and followed it out, eager to find Hannibal and thank him, and to figure out what in the world they were celebrating.

He followed it past the Gallery, where the places for their portraits were already prepared, waiting for Mr. Gray to add his finishing touches. Hannibal’s rich Alpha scent strengthened a split second before he rounded the corner to find his mate standing there, arms behind his back, chin tilted up as he gazed out the window.

His profile was so flawless that he seemed unreal, the sunlight turning his tawny skin to bronze and the glints of blond in his hair to ashen silver. When he turned his head, the light reflected in one amber eye, molten gold and brilliant. He smiled, his heavy Alpha fangs revealed without reservation, his pleasure flooding the bond until every step closer seemed weightless with ease.

“Every moment I see you, you are even more beautiful than the moment before,” Hannibal said, reaching out even as Will approached him, his long fingers extended in anticipation of Will’s touch.

Their fingertips met, fingers sliding in the spaces between to lace tight, always a perfect, effortless fit. He drew Will to him, the sunlight as warm and inviting as the look Hannibal gave him.

“I missed you,” Hannibal murmured, his other arm slipping around Will’s waist. He tugged him close, purring as the mound of Will’s belly pressed into his own.

“Are we close enough, now?” Will asked, his head tilted up just a fraction to bring his gaze level with Hannibal’s.
“Never,” Hannibal said, delighted once more by Will’s prodigious memory. He cocked his head, loosening his grip on Will’s hand to rub the small of his back, supple finger moving with gentle strength along the base of his spine. “I wasn’t certain if you would be pleased or ready to flatten me, or both.”

“Yes,” Will answered, laughing softly, his hands coming to rest on Hannibal’s arms. He was momentarily diverted by the shift of muscle and heat beneath his palms, and marveled at his own appetites, ruefully owning that Hannibal wasn’t the only one eager for the pleasures of their marriage bed. “I woke to the most beautiful bouquet of flowers with a marvelous string of pearls, and I must warn you your moral decrepitude is soon to be noted by our staff if you aren’t careful. Jimmy has remarked how you enjoy seeing me in pearls.”

“Oh, but I do,” Hannibal said, unperturbed. “I would risk any dangers of discovery to see that blush on your cheeks, Will.”

“I’m surprised I can muster a blush these days,” Will said, his smile wry. “But thank you, Hannibal. The flowers, the necklace, they were quite lovely. I hope the gift of that fishing gear means you’ll try again?”

“No, but I will content myself with sketching you as you enjoy yourself,” Hannibal told him, shifting around to Will’s side to cup him close, his hand smoothing down Will’s belly. “It will make a beautiful addition to my collection.”

“Collection?” Will echoed, suspicious. “How can you make that word sound so dangerous?”

“If you’d care to see my sketches, you’ll soon understand why,” Hannibal said, whispering the words in his ear, the heat of his breath making Will shiver. “But did you enjoy the music box?”

“As if you even have to ask,” Will said, leaning against him as Hannibal walked him slowly down the hall. “I loved it, of course. I was transported back to the Masquerade for a blissful moment, just as you intended. It was a beautiful gift, and very thoughtful of you, Hannibal. I’ll treasure it always. Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure,” Hannibal said, drawing him to a stop before a closed door. Winston snuffled along the frame, ears perked, and looked up at Hannibal in reproach as if to ask why he’d dared to close it. “You deserve every bit of spoiling I can manage, Will, especially today. But if we are to go fishing, then I suppose you’ll need to tie more lures.”

He opened the door as he spoke, the panel swinging wide onto a sewing room that hadn’t been used since the former Duchess was a young woman. Tier’s girls sat at attention, rising only at Hannibal’s small gesture, greeting Will with delighted wiggles of welcome.

“Hannibal!” Will whispered, staring around in surprise as he stroked the dogs’ heads. His wide eyes took in the freshly-papered walls, the drawn curtains spilling light from the garden beyond with a breathtaking view of the fountains and flowers. The furnishings were all new, a seating area arranged to accommodate conversation during needlework with storage in abundance for anything Will might wish to make.

He immediately was drawn to a desk placed perfectly to catch the light, the mount and magnifying glass for making lures already fixed to its surface. Ranged along the wall were decorative pegs, his lures from upstairs relocated to fill them, while others waited empty for lures of their own.

“Hannibal, what on earth?” Will breathed, touching the colored threads with growing excitement, the orderly rack filled to bursting, the little drawers beneath arranged with feathers and bone and bark. Placed in the center of the desk was a box and when Will eased it open, it revealed lure-making tools with silver handles in a bed of velvet. He closed the case, uttering a groaning laugh to realize it was shaped like a fish.

“You needed a proper room to make your lures and work on the baby’s gowns,” Hannibal said, drinking in every minute reaction, every widening of Will’s blue eyes, every flicker of joy that crossed his beautiful face. “Climbing all of those stairs to the attic will soon be too exhausting, and here we can spend time here together, just the two of us.”

“Are you going to make lures with me?” Will asked, grinning, putting the box down to run his fingers over the gilt edge of the desk, “Or will you help me make gowns?”

“I’m quite handy with a needle, thank you very much,” Hannibal said with a sniff of feigned offense. “I didn’t only just sew up people in my life, you know. I’m certain I can make a gown or two if I tried.”
Will’s laughter faded to a smile and he whispered, “Thank you for this, Hannibal. This is... this is incredibly wonderful. I have no idea what’s gotten into you today, but you’ve been very generous and your gifts are so beautiful.”

“Will,” Hannibal said, wading through dogs to reach his poised, content little mate. He grasped his cheeks with both hands and tipped Will’s face to his, softly reminding him, “It’s your birthday, my dear.”

Will’s eyes widened with realization, his surprise lost in the softness of Hannibal’s mouth as he kissed him.

“Happy birthday, my beautiful Wolf,” Hannibal murmured, thumbs smoothing Will’s cheeks, his smile soft and indulgent. “Now, what should we do first?”

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Grandfather sent his regards along with his gift, the accompanying note making his excuses. The writing was shaky, worrisome enough on its own without knowing how frail he’d become.

“He has always been so good to me,” Will mused, opening the little box to find a pin to match the others he’d received over the years, understated and modest but dripping with quality.

“He has always seen you as the treasure you are, Will,” Hannibal said, filling his soul with the sight of his mate lost in thought, his full lips curved in a soft smile, his pale hand resting on the bulge of his belly.

“I should wear this one tonight, don’t you think? It would please him,” Will said, turning to catch his husband watching him. “What is it, Hannibal?”

“Seeing you this way, so relaxed and happy,” Hannibal said, settling his hand over the gentle rise of Will’s belly, “seeing you carrying our child, it gives me the most enormous satisfaction.”

“Enormous satisfaction is a key contributor to my current condition,” Will said, chuckling, clasping Hannibal’s hand to his stomach. “Yours as well as mine... but mostly mine.”

Hannibal grinned, telling him, “That gives me enormous satisfaction, too, Will.”

Perhaps it was the Alpha purr in his voice, or the rumble of his laughter, or the way it mingled with Will’s chuckles, perhaps it was due to all of those things. Whatever it was, the baby suddenly kicked, pushing up against Hannibal’s palm and shifting.

Will’s eyes flew wide and he grinned, laying the box aside to place both hands next to Hannibal’s, the two of them silent and breathless waiting for the next movement.

The baby pushed and Will tugged Hannibal’s hand to feel it, grinning when Hannibal said, “That is most definitely a foot. Heavens! Such strength! They get that from me, you know.”

“Excuse me?” Will asked, laughing as Hannibal pressed his ear to his belly.

“No, don’t argue,” Hannibal said, delighted when the baby pushed against his cheek. “They will have your delicacy and build and adorable ears; they must have something from me.”

“Your temper, by the look of things,” Will said. “They hear your voice, Hannibal.”

“And yours,” Hannibal said, the Alpha depth in his tone vibrating through Will’s bones. It brought another furious-feeling protest from the baby that made them both laugh.

“Shall I tell you a story, hm?” Hannibal purred, kissing the spot where the baby had pushed against him. “Let me see... perhaps the time I agitated your mother and he coshed me with a fish?”

“You tell them that one every night,” Will pointed out.

“Do I? Well, another then,” Hannibal said, kissing Will’s belly, enchanted by the motion within. “I would tell you about the Carpet Incident, but I think we should wait until you’re older. Ah, but once upon a time your mother and I were at your cousin’s Garden Party—”

Mr. Hawkes let himself in, gingerly interrupting them and offended on their behalf that he had done so, but dutifully saying, “A letter has come for you, my Lord. Somewhat urgently, it would seem.”
“Urgent?” Hannibal asked, sitting up and pushing to his feet, not even the interruption able to spoil his high spirits. He plucked the letter from the salver and broke the seal as Mr. Hawkes removed himself, giving them privacy.

“I hope it’s good news from the Misses,” Will said, straightening his clothes as he got to his feet, smoothing his hand over his belly. “I am anxious to hear how they’ve been recently.”

Hannibal said nothing. He stood stock still with the letter held before him, silent and grave as he read it.

“Hannibal?” Will said, his smile fading, deep anxiety curling its fingers into the heart of his happiness, cold claws digging deep to pierce him to the quick as the bond filled with sudden, wrenching despair. In the depths of his mind, he could hear his father laughing.

“It’s from the Ministry,” Hannibal told him, and his hand trembled as he lowered the letter, the paper shaking. His voice was a harsh, low whisper when he said, “I’ve been recalled, Will. I’m being sent back to war.”

Chapter 53

Between one breath and the next, the light was blown out from Will’s world.

‘I’ve been recalled, Will. I’m being sent back to war...’

So many thoughts raced through his head, each striving for dominance over the others, a confusing jumble of fear and outrage and sinking despair that rendered him mute with shock—his Alpha was leaving, his husband was being taken, and with him would go all the happiness Will had finally begun to trust in.

It was the way Hannibal’s hand stopped trembling that snapped Will back into focus, the way the bond suddenly fell still as his husband wrestled his emotions into submissions, always seeking to spare him, even at his own expense.

Will reached for him, reached for the bond as he stretched out his hand, pulling Hannibal to him to wrap his arms around him.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered, pressed belly to belly, chest to chest, their child pushing and shifting between them. Hannibal’s arms hung at his sides, resisting the comfort Will offered, unwilling to crack the seal on his fear lest he disturb his little mate. But Will was a force to be reckoned with, unwilling to crack the seal on his fear lest he disturb his little mate. But Will was a force to be reckoned with, unwilling to crack the seal on his fear lest he disturb his little mate. But Will was a force to be reckoned with, unwilling to crack the seal on his fear lest he disturb his little mate. But Will was a force to be reckoned with, unwilling to crack the seal on his fear lest he disturb his little mate. But Will was a force to be reckoned with, unwilling to crack the seal on his fear lest he disturb his little mate.

The trickle of anxiety became a flood and Will closed his eyes, letting it run through him and out. Hannibal’s arms rose to fold around Will’s waist and the letter rustled softly against Will’s jacket, but he paid it no mind. There would be time for that, time to read it and see the details. For now, they needed one another more than they needed anything in the world, and Will was determined to be the boulder Hannibal had likened him to.

The rhythm of their heartbeats twined into a single melody, peaking and ebbing with the rise and fall of their breath. The baby shifted, the movement slight, but it was a keen, sharp reminder that they shared something so much more priceless and beautiful than an ordinary bond. They shared a soul, a piece of themselves distilled into a new life, and that was the greatest comfort either of them could ask for in the face of separation.

“You are always strong for me, Will,” Hannibal said, squeezing him with care, drawing a deep breath of his sweet, fertile scent. “I fear I must ask you to be even stronger.”

He loosened his hold on Will but didn’t let him go entirely. Instead, he brought the paper up, both of them turning so Will could read it.

It was succinct, formal, the wording stiff. Hannibal Lecter’s expertise were required at the front. A battlefield hospital had been taken, the physicians either dead or captured, and with a paucity of experienced doctors, he was called on once more to do his duty in service to the Crown.

It sent a chill through Will’s body, as if someone had dragged an ice-cold knife down the center of his being. He groped to sit and Hannibal sat with him, grasping his hand and searching him for signs of distress.
“Will? Are you having pain?”

“Nowhere physical,” Will whispered, putting the paper aside. It lay next to Grandfather’s gift, a menacing curl of paper stamped and approved by the Ministry of War.

He turned his blue eyes up to Hannibal’s and said, “My heart is breaking, Hannibal. That’s all.”

Hannibal flinched, dipping his face against Will’s hand when he cupped his jaw.

“I said I would never hurt you again—”

“Nor have you,” Will said, angling a glare at the letter that had disrupted their day so horribly. “They have, the Ministry of War, but I doubt very much they care about that.”

“No,” Hannibal conceded, turning his mouth to Will’s palm to kiss it, tasting the salt of his skin. “I will leave first thing tomorrow morning and arrange a meeting at the war office to see what can be done.”

“What can be done?” Will asked, doubt clouding his eyes, his brow furrowing in consternation. “It does not matter to them that you are heir apparent to your grandfather. I highly doubt it would move them to know you have a pregnant mate you’ll leave behind you. What possible argument can be used against something that deals in death and destruction? Your skills are what they desire, and they need not count the cost.”

Hannibal was silent for a moment, thoughtful, but the edge of his apprehension was blunted enough to allow him to think again, and his mind, like Will’s, was already refocusing.

“No, they will not count the cost,” he finally said. “I will see Mr. Buddish and check if there are any appeals I can file to delay my deployment, at least until after our child’s birth.”

Will studied him, his blue eyes shifting from deep blue to ocean green as the light struck them. He could feel the truth through his bond, Hannibal’s belief that he could manage such a thing gaining strength by the moment.

“Only an Alpha would be so confident,” he whispered, striving for humor but finding only dismay.

“I have more determination than confidence,” Hannibal said, lifting Will’s fingertips to his lips to kiss them. “I cannot leave my mate, especially when I sense there is more to these orders than meets the eye.”

Will’s brow shot up, confusion evident on his smooth face. It faded quickly, however, when Hannibal said, “I cannot shake the idea that Rathmore has his fingers in this, Will. He warned me once not to continue investigating him or else he would pack me off to the front. He must have made good on his promise.”

“But surely Timothy lacks either the influence or power to sacrifice an entire hospital of our men just to place you back into war!” Will said, horrified that anyone could be so underhanded.

“Eliminating the main medical services deals our armies a blow they might not have time to recover from,” Hannibal said, sliding his fingers around Will’s. “Whether Rathmore arranged it or not, it is a blessed convenient excuse to get me out of the country, which leaves you vulnerable, Will.”

Will swallowed hard, mouth thinning with displeasure. His fingers tightened on Hannibal’s in a brief squeeze, fighting his unease with his husband’s touch.

“I will have the guards, my pistol, the girls,” Will said, the words a soft, slow cadence meant to calm them both. “And Winston.”

All three dogs raised their heads, ears up and eyes watchful, and Will almost smiled but he found he simply didn’t have it in him.

“I will not leave you undefended,” Hannibal said, already furiously thinking of measures he could take. “I will arrange everything possible for your safety, Will. I will keep you safe, even from afar. I promise.”

Hannibal drew both of Will’s hands to his lips and kissed them, kissed his palms and pressed them to his face, and pulled Will into his lap.

“We will get through this,” he promised, breathing the words into Will’s delicate ear. “One crisis at a time.”

“One crisis at a time,” Will said, burying his nose against Hannibal’s throat and fighting despair with everything in him.
They did not tell Grandfather, not right away. Hannibal wanted to be certain there was no mistake before he delivered such a devastating blow.

It was a dismal end to Will's birthday, and he cursed the awful luck of that letter arriving as it had. The memory of Will's birthday dinner pained him all the way to the Capital the next day, his husband's bravery and poise once more reminding Hannibal that the Omega he had married was no shrinking violet, but strong and determined—his equal in life, able to take the bitter with the sweet.

And oh, how life had decided to be bitter.

“This puts us in a rather awkward position, Lord Clarges.”

Sir Gregory, the Secretary of War, spread his hands over a copy of Hannibal’s orders, his bushy, winged brows high.

“You years of service exceed those of any other physician in their Majesties army,” Sir Gregory said, watching him with a hardened soldier’s wariness. “You are the most qualified man for the position and there are no grounds to contest your appointment.”

“But?” Hannibal asked, sensing the hesitation.

“But, you were correct,” Sir Gregory said, plucking up the paper before him. “Lord Rathmore was the one who created your orders, and he did so without consultation or under any advisement.”

“You realize he is being investigated for treason?” Hannibal said, sitting ramrod straight in his chair. Though he did not wear his uniform, he was still a soldier, and that training went as deep as that of his medical studies.

Sir Gregory’s mouth pursed and he nodded, troubled. “Yes, I am aware, Lord Clarges. It is a... somewhat delicate situation. One must tread carefully lest one startle the quarry.”

“Your quarry has arranged to remove me from my ancestral home, part of some plot concocted between him and my husband’s father,” Hannibal said, the words growing sharper and shorter with anger as he spoke. “Sir Gregory, my grandfather grows weaker with every passing day and I have a spouse on the cusp of delivering our first child. I cannot be eight months away due to the specific designs of a traitor!”

“Lord Clarges, believe me, were I able to destroy your recall papers and replace you, I would do so,” Sir Gregory said, dropping the paper atop the others. “That you are next in line to be the Duke of Westvale and leave your spouse behind you makes no difference in this case. We are all equals in the eyes of the gods and the blow of the cannons.”

“I gave ten years of my life to this war, to this blessed country and those who rule Her,” Hannibal said, his voice a dangerous whisper. “And this is all you can offer me? A chance to leave my spouse a widow and my child half an orphan while the man who conspired to put me back on the front continues to feed us all bit by bit to our enemies?”

“Lord Clarges,” Sir Gregory said, holding his gaze. “I cannot prevent this. The orders cannot be rescinded without just cause! Barring the sudden demise of His Grace or you appointment to another position, they must stand as they are!”

“My Grandfather will undoubtedly outlive us all and I have no position,” Hannibal said, incensed.

Sir Gregory heaved a sigh and stood, leaving his chair to pour them both a drink. He brought one to Hannibal and settled himself on the edge of his desk, sipping from his own cup. “If Rathmore dares to move against you, he believes he will not be stopped, and I suspect the Council would rejoice to see you leave these shores.”

“Yes, I suspect they would,” Hannibal said, taking the tumbler when it was handed to him.

“Lord Clarges, you made your position on the subject of Omegan soldiers very clear,” Sir Gregory said, and smiled tightly when Hannibal’s eyes cut to him. “We have our spies, don’t we? You used to be the loudest voice speaking out against Omegas, couldn’t bear to even share a room with them, yet now you are a staunch supporter. I understand even the medical school you sponsor will allow Omegas to attend?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Hannibal said, not sure he liked where their conversation was going. “What of it?”
“Only that I and a great many others have been considering our own candidate in the next election, someone with more... progressive leanings,” Sir Gregory said, moving to pour them both a drink. “Someone whose outspoken change has become the subject of public interest.”

“That must have the Council in quite a state,” Hannibal said, neutral, taking a sip without tasting it. “If you’re attempting to tell me you want my support—”

“No, Lord Clarges, we want you,” Sir Gregory said, blunt. “We were poised to approach you on the subject of the elections with an eye to reform, starting with our military policies. We wished to offer you the position of election candidate with our backing.”

It caught Hannibal off guard, the offer so unexpected that he was speechless.

“We are not blind to the state of our soldiers and are very well aware that Omegas make up a significant portion of them. We have been for some time, and no few of us have been attempting to find a solution to the problem they present,” Sir Gregory said, swirling his liquor in his glass. “The sad state of affairs is that we cannot afford their loss. We certainly cannot afford the Council sending them back in droves to face imprisonment and the workhouse.”

“Until the law changes or there is some sort of protection in place for them, that is precisely what they face,” Hannibal said, getting his surprise in hand. “You tolerate them now because they swell your ranks and keep your war effort going. Please don’t attempt to persuade me that you have their interests at heart any further than the service they do you. The best they can hope for is to somehow survive and be discharged without ever being found out, or else risk having their pensions stripped from them.”

“No, Lord Clarges, they will not,” Sir Gregory said with a small smile. “We intend to introduce legislation through our appointee granting amnesty to any Omega currently in or already retired from their Majesties’ military, Lord Clarges. As loyal servants to the Crown, they will receive proper compensation for their service and their pensions will not be stripped from them.”

“Well,” Hannibal said after a moment of consideration. “I certainly never expected to be told that.”

“We are pragmatists, Lord Clarges, not monsters,” Sir Gregory informed him, “though I understand how the public would say otherwise. We need a man infamous for the strength of his convictions to carry that legislation through. What you and the Lietuvan government have managed—and we are aware of your actions in that regard—has plugged the dam, so to speak, but the floodwaters are still rising. Lord Withome of Kirk has been working with the Merchants’ Guild to broker a treaty. I expect that we shall very soon find terms to suit us all and bring this ghastly business to a close.”

Hannibal’s mouth pursed, his amber eyes narrowing to dangerous slits.

“You think the Council put Rathmore up to it?” he said, tossing back the rest of his drink, the burn no rival for the anger that rose in him. “Rush me off to the front before I could be named as a candidate?”

“That is precisely what I think,” Sir Gregory said, resuming his seat. “Rathmore is a traitor and a thief and before very many more months there will be evidence enough to convict him. When that happens, the orders he personally drafted without consensus from the office will be null and void. Should you agree to stand for election, Lord Clarges, I will begin the process of suspending your orders.”

“And my deployment?” Hannibal asked.

“The date must stand,” Sir Gregory said, as unhappy as Hannibal was. “We cannot manage the legal necessities beforehand, but we will recall you from the front the moment we have documentation to support the orders.”

Hannibal pondered the offer, knowing there were pitfalls aplenty in becoming a War Office-sponsored candidate. He imagined Will there with him, listening with those sharp ears of his, turning the conversation over to find the hidden meanings and implications. He could do so much good as an elected official in addition to his role as a Peer, would have the power to shape the future of their country for everyone, not just for men.
“Well,” Hannibal whispered, staring up at him with a calm that only lay along the surface, rippling atop the anger boiling beneath. “I suppose that’s better than I could hope for.”

He placed his tumbler down carefully and pushed it across Sir Gregory’s desk, saying, “We have some very important things to discuss, Sir Gregory. But I have some demands of my own, starting with my freight allotment.”

“Then shall we begin?” Sir Gregory asked, tipping his cup to Hannibal with a broad, pleased smile.

“You seem somewhat pensive, my dear,” Grandfather said, stirring against the pillows where he’d fallen asleep propped up, the newspaper still in hand.

“I’m merely thoughtful, Grandfather,” Will told him, laying aside the tiny nightgown he was working on slowly but surely. He smiled as he did so, ruefully saying, “At this rate, our child will have nothing at all to wear.”

“You’ve been very busy,” Grandfather said, his lids fluttering, fighting sleep. “You’ve always been such a good person, Charles...”

Will shot a startled glance at him, but feigned not to hear the slip. Instead, he said, “All one can offer the chaos and cruelty of the world is kindness, Grandfather. I hope you don’t mind my staying when you fell asleep? It’s so peaceful here.”

“Ah, yes, none of that pounding and rattling,” Roland murmured, his smile wan and tired. “They’ve nearly finished, haven’t they? Properly lined for gas and modern now?”

“They’re putting the finishing touches on the east wing and that will be the last of them,” Will said, tucking his busy work away. “It has already made a world of difference, don’t you think? I was very glad to have people from Hartford doing the work; the last thing I could bear is the presence of a stranger.”

“We wouldn’t dare have anyone here we don’t trust,” Roland said, shifting in a vain attempt to find comfort.

“Should I call for Mr. Zeller?” Will asked, rising to straighten his bedclothes. “You’ve barely eaten anything all day, Grandfather. Perhaps we could sit in the garden and have tea? The leaves are just beginning to turn and are the most beautiful colors.”

“No, my dear, that’s just fine,” Roland said, patting his hand before clasping it. “I’ve seen it many, many times. I find myself absorbed in the past these days, so much so that it seems more real to me than the present.”

A sharp pang of sympathy struck Will then, not through the bond, but through his Gift. He had formed an attachment to the old Alpha over the years, the man who had taken the place of father and grandfather all at once. It pained him deeply to see Roland failing despite all their best efforts, failing to the point that Zeller could hardly be persuaded to leave his side long enough to sleep or eat.

“If that is what brings you happiness,” Will softly said, bending to press his cheek to Roland’s cold hand, “then there can be no harm in it.”

“Many of the things that brought me happiness also brought me harm,” Roland said, drawing a breath that rattled in his lungs like a cold wind through broken shutters. “Lenora brought me happiness at first, when she gave me Grace, and then Cyrus. I know I was very strict with them, but I worried for them so much. Always worrying...”

His lids slid closed and his hand grew lax in Will’s own to the point that he thought Grandfather had fallen back to sleep.

“I couldn’t lose them, too,” he whispered, a spasm of pain tightening his features. “Not like I lost my first.”

Stunned, Will wracked his memory for any mention of another marriage, for any stray comment involving a child who predated Grace and Cyrus, but there was nothing he could recall.

Roland, according to Aunt Margaret, had indulged in an affair with Will’s grandfather, then vanished for over three years to Nippon, only to return and wed Lenora Bradford and start his family. No one at any time had ever breathed a word about any other children, legitimate or otherwise.
“Grandfather,” Will said, smoothing his forehead with his other hand, trying to soothe him. “You shouldn’t speak, Grandfather. You might say something you wouldn’t wish me to hear.”

“There is nothing in this world I would keep from you, Charles,” Roland said, tossing his head to one side, away from Will’s touch. “You always said there was nothing I could have done any differently. You said the gods would forgive me, but I cannot think they ever will.”

“Grandfather,” Will said, concerned enough that he gave his shoulders a gentle shake, startled when Roland’s amber eyes flew wide open in surprise.

“Will? What is it? Is it the baby?” he asked, worry rousing him from the hold his memories had on him, sharply delineating the past from the present, if only for a little while.

“Yes,” Will said, relieved that the baby chose an opportune moment to express their impatience with Will’s tension. “They’re kicking, Grandfather. Would you like to feel?”

“Oh! Yes! Yes, let me feel,” Roland said, struggling to sit up straighter as Will sat down on the bed next to him, turning to guide his hand into place. Roland’s eyes lit up with delight as the baby pushed against his hand, and he chuckled with pleasure, sighing, “I have always, always loved having babies in the House! I always wanted more children, a whole houseful!”

Will smiled, relaxing under the gentle touch of Roland’s chilled hand, but his thoughts returned to Grandfather’s statement, to his time in Nippon and the child he must surely have left there.

And the journal which might hold the answers.

There were other arrangements to be made in the Capital, which Hannibal made as quickly as possible. Some were pragmatic, like reconnecting with an associate who specialized in Omegan healthcare, Dr. Frederick Chilton, and engaging more guards for the short term. Others were far less so to the indiscriminate eye, but Hannibal knew they were just as vital as having a qualified doctor on hand in case Will went into labor in his absence. As an Alpha being separated from his mate at such a crucial time, he did everything he could think of to ensure Will would be comfortable in the final months of his pregnancy. If Hannibal had to be gone from Will, even for a short time only, he wouldn’t allow a day to pass that his little mate would forget about him. As long as he was deployed, Will would have something arrive at Hartford to remind him that he was thoroughly loved, from the tips of his curls to the curl of his toes.

He tried very hard not to think of it as consolation in case he should never return.

A stop in with Mr. Buddish confirmed that everything had been signed, sealed, and approved in the event of his death and he agreed that he would be in close contact with both Hartford and Fernhill to keep Will safe. It was all accomplished very nicely, quickly, quietly, and Hannibal was back on the train by the afternoon.

He did not return to Hartford, however, much as he wanted to. He took the long route to Fernhill and had a very somber, serious discussion with Aunts Grace and Margaret, Uncle Robert, Bedelia, and Anthony regarding his deployment and his candidacy. The entirety of the Fernhill Dimmonds promised to take every opportunity available to check on Will and Grandfather and keep them company in Hannibal’s absence. This time, Will would not be isolated and lonesome. This time, he would have his loving family surrounding him fit to drive him mad, knowing the Dimmonds, and he would have them to rely on should the worst happen.

His mind was more settled as he rode for home, anticipating the way Will’s somber expression would transform with a grin when he walked through the door. What wouldn’t he face to see his smile? He could survive anything, anything at all if it meant he could come home to his husband again.

Mr. Hawkes took his coat, gloves, and hat with his usual dignified grace, answering Hannibal’s inquiry regarding Will with, “He retired to his suite, my Lord. He’s spent the day sitting up with His Grace and was somewhat fatigued.”

“Is Grandfather up?” Hannibal asked, preparing to check on him if he was, but Mr. Hawkes shook his head.

“No, my Lord, he’s been extremely tired today,” he said, “and has been confused at times. Mr. Zeller is worried, my Lord. We all are.”
“I’m rather worried myself, Hawkes,” Hannibal said, absently straightening his jacket, his amber eyes fixed on the hallway leading to Grandfather’s suite. He shuddered at the thought of facing him, of telling Grandfather what he’d already shared at Fernhill. It would only add more weight to the burden he carried and Hannibal feared it might be too much at last to be borne.

“Mr. Winston and the Ladies are having a walk, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes told him, pulling Hannibal from his heavy thoughts. “Shall I have Peter feed them at the stables and bring them in after dinner?”

“Yes, if you wouldn’t mind,” Hannibal said, offering him a grateful smile. “I’ll be with Will, so he’ll be perfectly safe. Thank you, Hawkes.”

“It is my pleasure, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, pleased. “I will have tea sent up to his Lordship’s suite.”

“That would be perfect, thank you,” Hannibal said, striding for the stairs and bounding up them, his long legs eating up the distance in no time to reach Will’s room.

He was greeted with a sight that warmed him to his toes, one he fully intended to sketch the moment he was able. Will had fallen asleep on the small settee before the fire, a familiar envelope resting on the curve of his belly. He looked so utterly peaceful that Hannibal had to stop and admire him, his sleeping Eros with tousled curls and long lashes fanning beneath his eyes.

Those same curled lashes rose, Will’s limpid blue eyes meeting his, a smile spreading over the fullness of his pink lips as he said in a sleepy, purring chirp, “You’re home.”

“I am, only just now,” Hannibal said, pitching his voice low as if Will was still sleeping. He moved to crouch next to the settee, delving his hand into Will’s warm curls, smoothing the curve of his cheek with his thumb. “You looked so serene, I wish I’d asked Mr. Gray to paint you this way for me.”

Will’s raspy, low laughter accompanied a yawn and he pushed himself up, clutching for the envelope when it slid to one side. Reality returned as sleep fled, reminding him of why Hannibal had gone in the first place, and he patted the space next to him in silent invitation.

“How was your trip?” he asked, hesitant to seek details when they could only disappoint him.

“Rather quick, as I wished to get home to you,” Hannibal said, easing down at his side and smoothing his curls again before resting his arm along Will’s shoulders. “I met with Sir Gregory of the Ministry this morning and he is well aware that Lord Rathmore might have underhanded reasons for putting me forward.”

“Underhanded? Above and beyond his petty threats against you?” Will questioned, brows slamming down in a frown.

“It turns out that the Ministry is seeking legislation which will grant amnesty to any Omega who served or is currently serving in the army, Will,” Hannibal said, watching the thoughts moil in his husband’s eyes. “They wish me to introduce it, to be their candidate in the next election. Sir Gregory and I both believe that the Council sought to prevent that and used Timothy to do so.”

“Gods, is there no limit to how devious he is?” Will said, wrinkling his nose in disgust. The full import of what Hannibal had said struck him suddenly, his heart pounding with hope. “Wait, you said they want you?”

Hannibal nodded, flinching from the relief in Will’s voice, from the hope that lit his beautiful features up in animated excitement.

"Then they can’t deploy you, can they?" Will said, knowing the law well enough to know it was true. "That would be interfering with an election!"

“No, darling. Gods, I wish it was otherwise, but I still have to deploy," Hannibal said, his heart aching to see the sparkle fade from Will’s bright blue eyes, darkening them with melancholy. “Sir Gregory is getting the paperwork ready, but it will take months, no doubt, to file it through the clerk’s office. In the meantime, I’ve filled every freight allotment with suppressants and placed standing orders for a regular supply, starting the moment the ships can be filled.”

“Months?” Will echoed, strained. He rubbed his belly, stricken, and breathed, “You’ll miss the birth?”

Hannibal shifted to gather him up, tucking Will into the shelter of his arms and kissing the top of his curly-haired head.
“I,” he said, speaking slowly and calmly, measuring his words against an uncertain world, “will be here when the baby is born, Will. If by some chance the paperwork is lost, or plans change and I am not recalled from the front, then I will defect and return, if needs be.”

“You cannot do that,” Will murmured, the words muffled against Hannibal’s throat where his scent lay thick and comforting.

“Oh, there is very little I cannot do when it comes to my delicate and retiring little mate,” Hannibal breathed, nuzzling Will’s curls.

They lay pressed together in silence, Hannibal’s hand smoothing Will’s stomach, his thoughts even heavier than his mate’s belly.

“You must have a care, Hannibal,” Will finally said, retreating into logic to numb the growing ache in his chest, “The Council will do everything in their power to prevent your success.”

“And I will do everything in my power to ensure that they do not,” Hannibal said, hugging Will tighter to him. “The legislation is set to be introduced in the opening remarks when Parliament convenes, which means I should definitely be home before then. That’s good news, isn’t it?”

“It would be better news were you not to go at all!” Will said, his soft laugh warbling on a crack of tears.

“You’ll hardly know I’m gone,” Hannibal said, eyes closing as he savored his mate’s presence. “You’ll have the station business to tend to, my office to finish, the household to run, and a bevy of Dimmonds to manage.”

“I am seized with a sense of unreality,” Will quietly said, his hand opening over Hannibal’s heart and pressing. “To think that you will go, that—”

He cut off, unable to finish, unable to give voice to the horrors in his head. War—lifeless bodies, pain, and suffering, where no one was victorious no matter who won.

“I will return before you realize it,” Hannibal whispered, sliding his hand from Will’s belly to his back, stroking the length of his spine. “One way or another.”

The fear and worry that he’d tried so hard to suppress came trickling through the bond and Will flinched. He faced the unknown fears of childbirth, but Hannibal faced the known dangers of the front, and Will felt his anxiety, his frustration, and the bleak despair that rode just beneath it. Hannibal had hell before him, and Will wanted to be the strength he relied on to come through it. What they shared was not so easily broken, and it would take far more than war and distance to truly part them.

“No,” Will said, sitting up to face his husband, shaking his head with a surety that Hannibal found solace in, as if Will could bend the chances of Fate in his favor merely through the force of his faith. He slipped his warm palm from Hannibal’s heart to his cheek and said, “No. Only one way, Hannibal. You’ll come back to me on your own two feet, with that brilliant grin on your face, with those beautiful eyes of yours gleaming. Only that way, Hannibal.”

It brought a faint flush to Hannibal’s cheeks that surprised him, he was so pleased with his mate. He smiled, shaky and uncertain and vulnerable, and said, “As you are my husband, I will do as you say.”

“Of course you will,” Will said, the ugly offerings of his imagination swept aside by the strength of his certainty, his determination not to bend in the face of adversity. “You must, Hannibal. If not for me or our child, then for Grandfather. He is fading, Hannibal. Slowly but surely, he is slipping away from us and I fear we will not call him back.”

“Hawkes said he’s been confused today,” Hannibal said, his worry about the future narrowing back to the current worries here at home.

“He has been. He’s fading, Hannibal. Slowly but surely, he is slipping away from us and I fear we will not call him back,” Will said, strained. “He called me Charles this afternoon. I don’t think he realized it. I just went on as if he hadn’t, but he’s so lost in the past, Hannibal. He said... he said something about your father and aunt, that he’d been strict with them because he feared losing them as he’d lost his first child.”
Hannibal frowned, utterly flummoxed. “There were never any other children, or Aunt Margaret would have known of them. You’ve been handling Grandfather’s finances for years, Will; surely you would have seen payments to a family, had he another in his past.”

“That’s just it,” Will said, easing from his arms to pick up the envelope Chiyoh had brought the translation in. “I think he must have left a son in Nippon, Hannibal. That is the only area of his life that none of us know anything about.”

“And you think you might find mention of it in her journal?” Hannibal asked, taking the envelope from him.

“I feel ashamed to admit it,” Will said, a delicate blush pinking up his cheeks, rounder now in his pregnancy and even more enticing. “My curiosity has gotten the better of me and I find I’ve resorted to snooping.”

“He confided in you, Will. He would tell you, should you ask him.”

“No, he confided in Charles,” Will said, troubled. “I could never embarrass him by mentioning it, but now that I’ve heard it, I cannot put it from my mind.”

“And you needed something to occupy your thoughts,” Hannibal said, guessing the cause. “A problem with an answer you can find.”

“I detest feeling powerless,” Will said, frowning, “and if there is a Lecter Aunt or Uncle on the loose, at the very least we should know of them.”

“If I had any stray family members anywhere in the world, I’m sure they would have cropped up by now wanting their share of things,” Hannibal said, a rueful, unhappy smile curving his lips. “Did you find any mention of them?”

“I didn’t get much beyond where we left off before,” Will said. “Apparently, your grandfather was extracted on a military mission. She wrote that the Emperor had grown leery of her father’s power and agreed to allow a manageable force inside under the strict condition that none of them remain.”

Hannibal frowned, looking from his mate to the envelope. In a short time he would be leaving Will, leaving Hartford behind, leaving Grandfather, and gods alone knew if he would ever see home again. Will knew that as well as he did, and whatever answers were in Lady Murasaki’s journal would be lost to him along with any closure it might bring him.

“Grandfather is sleeping and dinner isn’t for hours,” he said, fiddling with the tie that held the flap closed. “And I think we could both use a distraction.”

“Are you certain?” Will asked, searching his face. “There will be enough unpleasantness waiting for you on the Continent, Hannibal. I wouldn’t want to add more that could distress you.”

“Nothing distresses me more than my mate’s displeasure, especially when he doesn’t cosh me for it,” Hannibal said, opening the envelope to withdraw the stack of loose papers. Will reached for it without hesitation, blushing with pleasure when Hannibal stole a kiss from him, saying, “Read for me, Will.”

“Behave yourself, Lord Clarges,” Will warned, smirking. He shifted back to sit stretched out along the settee, his round belly riding high beneath the drape of his robe.

Hannibal settled back facing him and pulled Will’s stocking-clad foot into his lap, planting his thumbs in his arch with unerrong precision as Will cleared his throat and read, “We grew used to the presence of the Outsider among us, though he was little better than a child in his speech and conduct. He amused me then, bewildered as he was by any aspect of war, unable to tie on armor or wield a sword. It filled my father with confidence that we could never fall to such inept people. He lived to regret his decision, but not for long. Yet in those years we had, Roland became a part of us.

I thought he was happy with us. I thought he was content. I thought he would stay forever. There was no part of my experience that allowed for defeat. My father’s territory stretched from one coast to the next, his armies vast enough to bring even the Emperor pause. I never dreamed that anything could breach the walls we built, yet they did.

They came with cannons, with rifles and bombs. They came in the night, killing all who lay in their path so that there was no warning. They came with the blessing of the Emperor, who had grown wary of my father’s power, and they razed us to the ground.
I still remember that awful night, as if I have never left it. Perhaps I never have. My instinct as a warrior was to rush to arms, but my instinct as a mother made me run to reach my son, Kohaku. I could hear him crying before I reached him, frightened by the chaos. I remember finding Roland there before me, gathering Kohaku up, how he shouted at me as if I was his enemy.

And then I understood that I was. His people had come, and he wanted to leave with them. He wanted to take my son to his distant lands and raise him as he had been raised—bewildered, unprepared, and weak."

“She doesn’t mention who the father is?” Hannibal mused, rubbing Will’s foot with gentle pressure.

“Not so far,” Will said, shaking his head. “Only Omegas and women claimed a child there, men seem somewhat incidental, more an inconvenience than anything.”

Hannibal smirked at that, and murmured, “Aren’t we just?”

“This is incredible, Hannibal,” Will said, absorbed in the world she offered, because his own held a parting he knew would too soon gut him. “It must be your grandfather she’s speaking of. To think they knew one another then, under such circumstances.”

“He got himself in the thick of things in a foreign country where he didn’t know the language and couldn’t trouble himself to learn it, and then he tried to kidnap her child when a force was deployed, ostensibly to reach him?” Hannibal said, one brow lifting over his amber eye. “That certainly sounds like Grandfather.”

Being flippant doesn’t suit you,” Will scolded, still scanning the writing. “Perhaps he hoped to save at least one innocent life? She seemed fond of your grandfather, but not particularly attached.”

“I think attachment came to her by a very difficult route, Will,” Hannibal said, thinking of his father’s concubine. “Please, continue.”

“‘I still remember how quickly it all happened,’” Will read, his voice falling into a soft lilt of storytelling, “‘how they burst in and saw a man like them where he did not belong, how they ripped my son from Roland’s arms despite his screaming, how they dragged him away as I tried to save my son from falling, from striking his head. I remember how I wished I was dead when Kohaku died in my arms, how I did not even fight when they fired on me, how I lay bleeding with my baby against my heart and listened to the screams of my family dying around me.

But the longer I lay there without dying, the angrier I grew until I knew nothing beyond fury. I found the strength to rise. I found the strength to leave my child where he lay and strip my father of his armor. I found the strength to drive them out, and I vowed to never stop until every last one of them was flung from our shores.

It was Roland who sent for them. One of my servants had carried a note, unable to read its contents, thinking nothing of it. Roland had called for them, and they had come. He had flouted my father’s hospitality, turned on the people who had chosen him, and tried to steal my son away.

And now his son sits before me, rapt and watchful and desperate for a distraction that I will gladly give. I am determined to give. I will take him, as Roland took my son, and he will know what it is to lose the child he loves.”

Will put the page down, turning it over in stunned silence, unable to believe what he’d just read. His blue eyes met Hannibal’s, his horror reflected in his husband’s amber gaze. He rubbed his belly, his Gift making her grief his own, her loss into his. It was so vivid that he had to turn his head away lest Hannibal see how disturbed he was.

The arrival of their tea bought him time, time enough to separate himself from Lady Murasaki, pulling the sticky tendrils of her blunt, brutal accounting away from the fertile soil of his heart. The scent of blood slowly faded, as did the sickening pain of such a terrible loss. His heart broke for her, the Lady Murasaki, one mother to another. No matter her actions, no matter the person she had become, no one deserved to lose their child, especially in such an ugly, senseless way.

The servant left after placing the tea tray in easy reach, leaving them alone again, but by then Will had reined his Gift in enough, or so he thought.

“Will?” Hannibal said, his mate’s distress not lost on him no matter how he tried to hide it. “Perhaps we should stop here?”
“No, I just—There must be some explanation,” Will said, shaking his head, peering at the page again as if the contents might have rearranged themselves. “Surely Grandfather would not do such a thing deliberately? Stay with her family for so many years and betray them? Try to take her child away? Leaving them all to die? Gods, no wonder she was angry!”

“My father must have presented the perfect opportunity to extract some measure of satisfaction. She began to lay plans from the moment she met him,” Hannibal whispered, thoughtful. “Where was it, Will? Where did they first meet?”

Will dragged his imagination from the horror’s she’d written of and looked at the next page, saying with a faint air of distraction, “In Norig, at the Court of Frederick the Faithful. She was performing there in an appearance before the King. Your father was invited as a guest but it looks as if he’d already been there for some time. She writes that he landed in Court like a die gone astray from a shaking hand, no reason or intention, only happenstance.”

“He was mired in grief, I imagine,” Hannibal mused. “Grandfather said he traveled all over the Continent, that the men he’d send after him were as apt to find my father penniless in a brothel as they were to find him dining with a Prince, and taking no pleasure in either.”

“Considering what he thought had happened, I cannot imagine he found pleasure in very much at all,” Will said, and as much as he wished he wouldn’t, he felt sympathy for Hannibal’s father, as well, his understanding wide enough to encompass the pain he, too, had suffered through.

“She lost her family, held her son as he died, and still had the strength to stand up and wage war in her homeland for twenty-some years,” Hannibal said, summing the time between Roland’s arrival back home and Murasaki’s arrival on the Continent with Chiyoh. “Gods, it’s difficult to believe anyone could be so... extraordinary.”

“If all Omegas in Nippon were like her,” Will mused, smoothing the pages, “I can hardly believe they ever lost a single battle.”

“There were never Omegas like her,” Hannibal murmured, thinking of how Chiyoh had said that same thing to him in the shaded quiet of the cemetery. It prompted him to say, “I knew she was a good deal older than my father, but somehow I never realized just how much, even seeing the dates on her stone.”

“She would have been sixteen or seventeen when your father was born,” Will said, watching his reactions. “She must have been in her early forties when they first met.”

“She always looked the same,” Hannibal said, his voice growing soft as he deliberately drew her memory to him. “I knew her for years Will, nearly a decade, and never once did she ever change.”

“Was she beautiful like Chiyoh?” Will dared to ask, sensing his husband softening. He tried to imagine her, the Lady Murasaki. He found a warrior in his mind’s eye, wiry strength and brutal determination and bravery. It was an interesting effort to make that same warrior into a celebrated courtesan who had risen to stardom as a performer in only a few short years.

“She was incredibly beautiful,” Hannibal said, his hands falling still on Will’s feet. “The most beautiful person I had ever seen in my short life, hair like a fall of ink and eyes deep and dangerous as a still forest pool. I never remember her smiling, though. She always seemed... hard somehow, watchful and wary, as if she had locked herself away somewhere none of us could never reach.”

“She might have very well done just that,” Will said, skimming the writing as he spoke, blinking away his tears. “She lost everything, Hannibal, just as Chiyoh said. All of her children died in that last battle she waged; she truly came away with only the baby in her arms and nothing else. Your grandfather was just the first of many to arrive... It’s terrible to think of it, strangers coming into your home and laying claim to everything they have no right to, disrupting a way of life that had no dependence on or need of them, leaving devastation in their wake.”

“I’ve seen it firsthand,” Hannibal quietly reminded him, resuming his massage of Will’s long feet more for the sake of distraction than anything. “War makes even the mildest man a monster. It was no wonder she was out for blood. Does she write more of those years in her homeland?”
Will nodded, turning the pages to check. “Yes, a great deal. The historical value alone is immense, Hannibal. We know next to nothing about Nippon prior to its invasion; this documentation is just... astonishing. She missed her home very much, and many of her entries hold a memory or another of her childhood and early life.”

“It is my father I’m most interested in,” Hannibal said. “Selfishly, I suppose, but I remember so little about him. Was she able to convince him to return home right away?”

“No, not right away,” Will said, setting aside a sizable chunk of the translation with a mental promise to revisit it. “She had quite a fortune, the Lady Murasaki, gifts from admirers and such. And a tendency to create chaos, it seems. She moved from the Court at Norig to that of Gallia after inciting a duel between the Crown Prince and a Duke for her favors.”

“Those must have been very tempting favors for a man to risk death over them,” Hannibal said, moving up to Will’s ankles, his powerful fingers light and gentle.

“Neither of them ever knew,” Will said, a small, impressed smile on his lips. “She never once even hinted at interest in either one of them; it seemed they couldn’t help themselves. But she took Chiyoh and your father with her when she left. It looks like by then he was almost entirely dependent on her where money was concerned, and had picked up a very serious opium habit. She mentions arguments over it several times.”

“Chiyoh had said as much,” Hannibal said, straining to recall but unable to remember ever seeing his father indulge in opium. “Theirs was a very troubled relationship, but I expect we’re about to find out about it.”

The quiet unease in his deep voice prompted Will to lay the translation aside, saying, “Perhaps that’s enough for now. We can look again this evening, move through it a few pages at a time.”

Time. The one thing they didn’t have much left of. It was a harsh reminder to them both of what they’d sought escape from and stole the slight ease they’d found.

Will reached out and tugged Hannibal towards him, cradling his husband against the softness of his chest and the firm bulge of his stomach. He rubbed his chin over the crown of Hannibal’s head and kneaded his nape, eyes closing simply to relish his nearness. He tried not to count how many hours he had left to hold him this way, but it lingered in his mind, ticking like the second-hand on his watch, pouring their moments away bit by bit.

“I tell you what,” Hannibal murmured, nuzzling the bare skin of Will’s throat exposed by his gaping collar, “why don’t you read it in my absence, Will?”

“No, I couldn’t,” Will told him, shuddering to even think of that terrible day dawning.

“Please,” Hannibal said, relaxing against him with a sigh. “You can write to me of what you find, tell me about it as you discover her through her writing. You see the world differently than I, in ways I am blind to. Your insight, your Gift, they would lead you to draw conclusions I might overlook entirely.”

“You would see her through the lens of my perception, Hannibal?”

Hannibal chuckled, a tired and sad sound, and said, “That might be the only way I can bear to see her, Will.”

He lifted his head and kissed the tip of Will’s snub nose, breathing, “Everything is more beautiful when seen through your eyes.”

Will smiled at that, reaching up to cup his face, feeling the presence of Hannibal’s worry riding just beneath the surface of the bond. He did the only thing he could think of to keep it at bay. He pressed a kiss to Hannibal’s forehead and told him, “I love you, Hannibal Lecter. Always and forever, I love you.”

There was no chance that night for Hannibal to break his news to Grandfather, and in all honesty he was glad of it. He dreaded the pain he would cause and hoped to avoid it as long as possible, which unfortunately only lasted until morning.

“You can’t put it off forever,” Will warned, smoothing Hannibal’s jacket and tugging at his cuffs. “He’ll be furious enough that you told Fernhill first. You know how he dislikes being the last to know things.”
Hannibal reluctantly conceded the point, admiring his mate in his freshly-donned maternity clothes. The loose drape of clothing and the long jacket suited Will, as most things did. But even the sight of his mate looking kissable and rosy-cheeked in the morning light couldn’t delay the inevitable, and he sighed, “I only hope this doesn’t destroy him.”

“Of course it will destroy him,” Will said, flattening his hands on Hannibal’s chest and looking up at him. “He loves you like a son, perhaps more so. It will break his heart and there’s no sense pretending otherwise. All we can do is our best to support one another in hope until you return safely.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Hannibal said, the cruel truth doing nothing to bolster his motivation.

“I’ll take something to read to him,” Will said, gathering up his book and, as an afterthought, the envelope holding the translation. “Perhaps I can distract him once you’ve given him your news.”

“I will never forgive myself if this is what finally does him in,” Hannibal, escorting Will out of his suite.

“He’s much stronger than that,” Will reminded him, striding along at Hannibal’s side. “Where do you think you get it from?”

“I pray he’s as strong as you think he is,” Hannibal breathed, and fell silent, his thoughts focused on how he would tell his grandfather that he was leaving Hartford once again.

Zeller answered the door, looking rumpled and weary, saying only, “He’s sleeping.”

“We’ll wait,” Hannibal said, equally as short, bristling at his grandfather’s irreverent valet.

Zeller cocked a brow at Hannibal, but gave way to the glowering Alpha, a wry smirk on his stubble-ridden face. Will angled a warning look at him as they passed, but Zeller paid it no mind, heeding no one but Roland, and half the time not even him. Still, he pulled chairs to Grandfather’s bedside for them before leaving them alone, retreating to the small attached room he’d made his own.

“It will forever escape me how he tolerates that man,” Hannibal said, whispering so as not to wake Roland. He seated Will, settling him with gentle care before sitting down next to him.

“Your grandfather is very fond of Zeller, and Zeller takes excellent care of him,” Will reminded him, balancing the translation and book across his knees. “No doubt this recent lapse has him as worried as we are.”

“He should be worried,” Hannibal said, the husky purr of his Alpha voice rousing the baby to shift. He noticed Will start and guessed the cause, settling his hand over Will’s stomach with a proud grin. “And he’d better hope Grandfather has made provisions in his will because I refuse to tolerate such cheek!”

“No, you’d much rather give it,” Will whispered, smirking. He tugged the translation out from beneath the book he’d been reading to Roland and said, “We may as well peek ahead while he’s still sleeping.”

“peek ahead at what?” Roland asked, startling them both.

“Grandfather!” Hannibal said, surprised. “Were you faking, you old goat?”

“No! I wasn’t faking! What is that?” Roland asked, curious, warning, “No, don’t hide it, I already know it’s there and you both look guilty as sin!”

He pushed up against his pillows, leveling a stern look at the pair of them and saying, “Out with it! What is that you have there, hm?”

Hannibal cleared his throat and spoke first, saying, “It is a translation, Grandfather.”

“Yes,” Roland said, his amber eyes sharpening with awareness in a way Will found vastly reassuring. “Well? I do love a secret, and I haven’t the time to pry answers out of you, you confounding boy!”

“It’s a translation of Lady Murasaki’s journal, Grandfather,” Will said, diverting the old Alpha in an instant. “I found it hidden away at Chelsea House and had it translated. Chiyoh brought it some months ago.”

“Chiyoh,” Grandfather said, her name a whisper. “So that was the woman you took to Duxbury, was it? Why on earth are you hiding it from me?”
“We were worried how you might react,” Hannibal said, still not certain he was half as calm as he seemed. “I know you cared very little for Lady Murasaki, that there was a feud between our families—”

“Feud? Her father kept me prisoner for three years, Hannibal!” Roland said, his good humor fading. “I daresay that’s rather more than a petty feud!”

“Prisoner?” Will echoed, perplexed. “You weren’t their guest?”

“Guest? Gods, no! That warlord Murasaki held me as a political prisoner!” Roland said, flushing at the memory of it. “He tried using me as leverage to make himself Emperor with our government’s backing! I can’t tell you how many times I tried to escape from him! I’ve never met an Omega so terrifying in all my life!”

“Grandfather!” Hannibal said, shocked. “Why have you never said so before?”

“There was no need!” Roland said, offended. “Do you think I am proud of it? Do you think I am grateful that she kept a record of it that would return to haunt me? Hm? Hand that here.”

“We have copies,” Hannibal said, hoping to prevent his commandeering it.

“You’d better hope you do!” Roland said, grasping the pages in his shaking hand and laying them in his lap. “Give me my spectacles, Hannibal.”

He slid from his chair with a schoolboy’s strict obedience, doing as his grandfather bid him before he could stop himself.

“Three years I spent, living under the shadow of that wretched dragon, the Murasaki House symbol,” Roland muttered, peering down at the pages. “I thought I would never escape!”

“She said she thought you were happy there, content,” Will ventured, anxiously watching Roland skim the first few pages, hoping he would not destroy the translation out of hand. “That it took her completely by surprise when you betrayed her father.”

“Manufactured my own rescue, you mean!” Roland said, snorting with disdain. “And I was anything but content! The only happiness I ever had there was—”

He cut off abruptly, his mouth trembling. “Well, it hardly matters now.”

“Grandfather, what we read there,” Hannibal said, somber, “it was very difficult to believe. She said you had orchestrated the annihilation of her entire clan, that you were attempting to steal her son away—”

“Her son?!” Roland cried, anger mounting with every breath. He scoured the pages, his hands trembling so hard that the papers shook.

“Grandfather,” Hannibal said, alarmed by how red Roland’s cheeks grew, how agitated he was. “Grandfather, you must calm down! You’re working yourself up.”

“I will work myself up if I bloody well please!” Roland rasped, outraged. “How dare she! How dare she?!”

“Grandfather, please,” Will said, attempting to take the translation from his hands, but Roland clutched the pages like grim death, his knuckles burning white. “We never meant to upset you. We won’t speak of it again; it was an awful, ugly end for that poor child any—”

“He was my son!” Roland cried, a terrible Alpha snarl beneath the words. “He was my son!”

The color fled from Roland’s cheeks and he stiffened, as if the force of his anger had strangled him. His mouth opened and closed, only a gurgling moan escaping on a hiss of breath. The pages of the translation slid from his lax hand, fluttering across the floor in a chaos of spilled paper.

“Grandfather!” Hannibal said, both of them moving to catch him as Roland fell back against the pillows, boneless, lifeless, staring sightlessly at the ceiling and far beyond the anguished cries of his beloved grandchildren.
Chapter 54

The tick of the clock echoed in Will’s ears, thumping with the beat of his pulse. The hour had struck ten and Hartford House was wrapped in numb, mournful silence, the servants going about their duties in whispers, anxious for any news.

Will paced from the window back to the door, paying no mind to the beautiful day unfolding beyond the wall of Hartford House, not when such tragedy had struck within. Winston and the girls watched him from where they lay before the empty fireplace, their dark eyes tracking his every movement with alert awareness.

He paused mid stride when he felt Hannibal coming towards him, the fall of his boots on the carpets vibrating as much through Will’s senses as through the floorboards. He smoothed his jacket and straightened his cuffs, grooming himself without realizing it, trying to calm his nerves.

Hannibal came in at a brisk stride, drawn to his mate like a moth to flame, finding him without error in the depths of Hartford House. His mouth was taut and tight, strained around the edges, his amber eyes weary with exhaustion, but he came straight to Will, breathing, “He will live.”

“Oh thank gods!” Will said, eyes closing on tears of relief as Hannibal embraced him, hugging him tight. “If you had not been there, Hannibal! I cannot bear to imagine what would have happened to him!”

“There was very little I could do, in all honesty,” Hannibal admitted, loosening his hold on Will to wipe away a tear that had strayed down Will’s round cheek. “These events build with very few symptoms to betray them, but when they present, they do so with a fury. He is very, very lucky to be alive.”

“I should never have taken the journal to his room,” Will said, frustrated by how thoughtless he’d been, his curiosity nearly costing Roland his life. “I am furious with myself for provoking something which could have killed him!”

“You didn’t, Will,” Hannibal said, drawing a deep breath on a thoughtful sigh. “Confusion is one of the few warning signs, but it is so often a malady of the aged that it gets overlooked. It was waiting inside of him, coiled like a viper to spring regardless of the provocation—and do not forget our purpose in being there.”

Will flinched, paling, but raised his blue eyes to meet Hannibal’s, sharing his guilt.

“I’m very glad I was unable to tell him about my deployment,” Hannibal said, kissing Will’s forehead right between his disapproving brows before he moved to the liquor cabinet and poured a measure for both of them. He swallowed his in one gulp and poured another before saying, “The shock combined with apoplexy might have been too much for even a devil like Grandfather.”

Will approached him slowly, settling his hand between Hannibal’s shoulders and fitting himself to his side. “We cannot risk losing him altogether with another such shock.”

Hannibal took the second drink in another swallow and set the crystal stopper back in place, frowning.

“I will write for an emergency deferment,” he said, thinking of the steps he would have to take. “Hopefully, the next date will be far enough out that Sir Gregory’s petition goes through and I needn’t leave Grandfather at all, or you, for that matter.”

“Surely they will see reason!” Will said, clutching the glass when Hannibal turned and pressed it into his hand. “They cannot possibly seek to send you overseas when he is in such a delicate state of health!”

“Anything short of death is not enough to cancel a military draft for duty. A deferment is the best we can hope for,” Hannibal said, knowing that well enough. He gestured to the cup and said, “Drink it. One swallow won’t hurt the children and you’ve had a terrible shock. We all have.”

Will could hardly argue that point, and took the half-swallow Hannibal had poured him with a slight grimace, shivering as the heat warmed through him.

“Gods, I was afraid something like this would happen,” Hannibal said, rubbing his forehead with his hand. “I must write to the Capital, to Mr. Buddish, and send to Fernhill, as well.”

“I will send to Fernhill,” Will said, putting his tumbler down and moving to the desk where he had already prepared his writing tools, “They must know what has happened.”
“So long as they do not ask what provoked it,” Hannibal said, closing his eyes and tipping his head back, shrugging the tension out of his shoulders. “Considering what he said, I’m surprised that I haven’t suffered apoplexy! Grandfather and Lady Murasaki had a child together? Even your imagination must have difficulty with that!”

“I honestly never dreamed that would be the child he spoke of,” Will said, settling at the desk but making no move to write, his weighty blue eyes on his husband. “He tried to take his son with him when he left... instead the child was lost to them both. It’s absolutely horrifying.”

He shuddered, the vivid images her writing had inspired cavorting through his head despite his best intentions, her grief mingling with his own to fill him with sadness and regret. He had to clamp down tight on his Gift to resist it, to separate himself from her and focus on the present.

“When Grandfather mistook me for Charles, he said that the gods could never forgive him,” Will said, and Hannibal turned to look at him, curious. “If he sent word for help in Nippon, then those people came at his invitation. They murdered his son and shot the Omega who had carried their child. That must haunt him every day of his life.”

“Which unfortunately may not be for much longer,” Hannibal said, fear and grief for Grandfather threatening to break through his self control. “Yet, piling the Dimmonds in on top of everything else...”

Will’s heart ached for his husband, desolation and dread swelling through the bond, stress enough to test even an Alpha of Hannibal’s strength. Gently, he told him, “Perhaps I can find some civil way to suggest they not converge on us just yet.”

“If anyone could find a sensible way to do so, it’s you,” Hannibal said. “Ask them for a week’s reprieve. By then we should know if he will make any gains at all.”

**ZZZ**

Under Hannibal’s care, Roland managed to survive the event that had nearly taken his life. It rendered him mute, unmoving and unresponsive where he lay, his eyes half-closed and fixed on something none of them could yet see. Hannibal was as much a permanent fixture at his side as Zeller was, the two working together without friction to keep Roland comfortable and cared for.

In those quiet hours when Hannibal would deign to rest at Grandfather’s bedside, his head pillowed on Will’s lap, Will would read Lady Murasaki’s journal aloud, stroking Hannibal’s hair and forehead until the tension left his powerful body.

“I met someone today,” Will read, tipping the page towards the lamp to better see it, his fingers stroking the tender skin beneath Hannibal’s jaw. “I heard a child crying in the house. I could not find it at first, this place is so large, but Chiyoh led me to him. It’s strange how some things never leave you. I haven’t held a baby since Chiyoh was small, but I reached out for him before I realized it.

“Amer eyes, like a lion’s, like my son’s. I’m so weak in the end, aren’t I? All my plans and plotting and determination to bring me into Roland’s world, and one small, bright-eyed child reaching up for me from his crib makes all my walls crumble to dust.

“I held him. What else could I do? He looked at me with such open expectation, I could not resist him. I plucked him up into my arms and he clung fast with both hands, strong and determined as I have ever been, demanding to be loved as all babies desire, and there is no way to refuse. I wanted to hate him, I tried to hate him, but the moment he reached for me, my heart opened wide and swallowed me whole. I held the memory of my Kohaku and sang him to sleep. His skin holds the scent of the forest, of the rich earth, the sweetness of a baby. I felt his heart beating against my breast, the stir of his breath on my shoulder, felt his trust like a knife in my soul, given so freely and without expectation of anything but my love. I could hardly bear to lay him down again, to leave him in his crib fast asleep.

“Hannibal is his name, tawny like a dappled little fawn from his hair to his toes. Perhaps there is another way after all. Perhaps it will not have to end in blood. Perhaps I can leave the warrior to rest and be the mother he cried for, straighten Cyrus out at last and forge a path we all can take together, a family of odds and ends, but a family nonetheless.”
Will laid the page aside, aware that his mate was awake and listening with quiet consideration. His own heart echoed with how painful it was for Hannibal to hear her speak so gently of him, this Omega he had hated his entire life, the one who had turned on him and hardened him against trust until the world was filled with suspicion.

Hannibal turned his head slightly to look up at Will, half-lidded amber eyes like a lion’s, bright with tears unshed.

“I know,” Will murmured, reaching down to smooth his cheek. “... I know...”

“She loved me,” Hannibal whispered, only those words and no more, the tightness in his throat preventing more.

“With immediacy and abandon,” Will said, thumb brushing away a stray tear that slipped down Hannibal’s temple.

“Whatever happened after, Hannibal, her first impulse was to reach back when you held your arms out to her.”

“I called her mother,” Hannibal said, managing to force the admission past his deep-seated hurt. “Somewhere, it all went so wrong, but I loved her. She was the only mother I ever knew.”

“I think,” Will said, his words slow and soft, “that if Cyrus had not prevented it, had he not perverted and thwarted her intentions with her concession, she would have raised you alongside Chiyoh, and happily so.”

He tipped the page, regarding it thoughtfully, adding, “She seemed so ready to renounce her revenge. You gave her hope, Hannibal. That things could change and she could have a life here, that she could let the warrior rest and the mother thrive.”

“I thought it would bring me peace to know it,” Hannibal said, his heavy sigh deep enough that he shuddered. “Instead, it only makes what she did even more painful.”

“Loving someone gives them the power to hurt you,” Will said, laying the pages aside to rest his free hand over Hannibal’s heart. “Knowing she harmed you despite loving you... I cannot see how that would bring any peace at all, merely understanding.”

“I cannot forgive her,” Hannibal breathed, unable to meet Will’s gaze despite the acceptance he would find there. “I’m not sure I will ever forgive her.”

“Nor must you,” Will reminded him, rubbing the delicate skin of his throat. “Lady Murasaki does not strike me as an Omega who values forgiveness, Hannibal. When you are ready, if you are ready, it will come.”

They fell into companionable, reflective silence, and Will felt the turmoil in Hannibal’s bond settle, what they’d learned slowly considered and searched against a childhood spent in resentment.

A noise from the bed startled them both, the deliberate sound immediately bringing Hannibal to his feet, his past abandoned for his present.

“Grandfather?” he asked, moving to smooth the elderly Alpha’s hair, surprised to find his eyes open, fully alert and aware.

“Can you hear me?”

Roland blinked, the movement exaggerated to show that he intended it, and Hannibal laughed on a relieved breath, grasping Roland’s hand in his.

Will hasted around the other side of the bed, shooing the dogs who had risen when they had. He smiled when Grandfather’s eyes rolled his way, sliding from his face to his belly as if in question.

“Grandfather! Heavens, it is so good to see you awake,” Will said, speaking to him as Hannibal examined him. “We’ve been so lost without you!”

Zeller emerged from his room, drawn by the commotion, and pushed in next to Will, sighing, “Thank gods! You scared the life out of me, old man!”

“Zeller!” Hannibal warned, but it lacked any sharpness of reprimand. “Go fetch him something to eat, nothing too thick. We must keep his strength up.”

Zeller was off before Hannibal even finished speaking, snagging his jacket from the back of the chair to make himself presentable before Mr. Hawkes could see him.

“You gave us all quite a fright,” Hannibal said, relieved when Roland’s gaze moved back to him without hesitation, clearly tracking and cognizant. “It was a fit of apoplexy, Grandfather. We very nearly lost you.”
Roland’s eyes shifted and he made a soft sound of effort, an edge of panic tingeing his scent, so much so that Hannibal put a calming hand on his shoulder and told him, “It affected your movement, Grandfather. We’ll have to work on getting that back, but I’m hopeful since you’ve woken that it will come in time.”

He slid his arms around Roland to sit him up, pained by how frail he felt, brittle and thin as an old, dried stick. Will plumped the pillows behind him and Hannibal eased him back, saying, “There, that should be better. You almost look yourself again, though you could use a shave.”

“I would offer, but Mr. Zeller would chase me from the room in offense,” Will said, smoothing Grandfather’s wild hair from his brow, needing to touch him and comfort Roland as much as himself.

Mr. Hawkes returned with Zeller, bearing the familiar silver salver over to Hannibal.

“Is it Fernhill?” Will asked, moving aside for Zeller to settle the tray he’d brought in. “Aunt Margaret said she would warn us if she was bringing more than just herself today.”

Hannibal opened the envelope, a frown falling over his face as he read it.

“No,” he said, disappointed by the contents. “My orders have been revised to take Grandfather’s recovery into consideration.”

“How long?” Will asked, stricken, gripping the bedpost in anticipation of bad news.

“Two months’ time,” Hannibal said, watching Will’s eyes slide closed in mingled relief and disappointment. “Which gives me just enough time, I hope, to have Sir Gregory’s paperwork pushed through and ensure I’m here for the birth.”

It was precious little to hope for, but they clung to it all the same. For now, Grandfather’s awakening was victory enough to sustain them.

They waited for word of Hannibal’s appointment, but were met only with frustration. Paperwork was vanishing, being misplaced or destroyed altogether, and Sir Gregory was doing his best to root out the various sources of the problem which seemed to be threaded throughout the entirety of the Ministry, thanks to the Council’s wide reach.

So they waited. They began to raise the station at Hartford and they finished Hannibal’s practice in town and they spent their evenings reading the journal aloud to Grandfather. Will had been reluctant at first, but even immobile and unable to speak, Roland still had a way of making himself known quite clearly, and he quite clearly wanted to hear what Murasaki had written.

The nights, however, were theirs to share, curled up together in Hannibal’s bed with the baby between them and the dogs at their feet. Sometimes they made love, rare now and even more gentle, but mostly they talked. They spoke of their future. They spoke of baby names and Marsham Heath and the medical school. They spoke of Hannibal’s schedule once he returned and how he would split his time between the Capital and Hartford, how Will and the children would join him when possible. They spoke of Abigail and when she would visit and Will’s picnic with Molly under the trees in Duxbury. They spoke of Lady Murasaki’s slow decline into despair as her fortune was squandered and her love for Hannibal twisted into a frantic desire to harden him against future pain. They spoke of anything and everything until the hour grew late and exhaustion overtook them each night, but never once about the war, never once about Hannibal’s departure, as if not speaking of it might keep it at bay.

As the days raced by and Will’s belly grew larger, Roland regained the use of his right hand, and Hannibal was hopeful that he would recover more movement with time, though he feared his grandfather would never entirely rebound from such a devastating event. But like grains of sand in an hourglass, trickling away one by one, the days passed them by and Hannibal knew he would have no choice but to reluctantly leave the care of his mate and Grandfather in his family’s capable hands.

“Is everything prepared?” Will asked, slipping into Hannibal’s room in his nightshirt and robe, his slippered feet almost soundless on the carpets. Winston heaved himself up from before the fire and moved to greet him, tail wagging, but subdued by their low spirits.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, closing the latches on his medical bag and resting his hand atop it as he regarded his mate. He couldn’t help but smile, even knowing he would leave him come morning. Six years ago, he would never have imagined himself
so deeply in love, so content, so happy, and the reason stood before him—his brilliant, cherished mate, who had given him the forgiveness he didn’t deserve and the coshings he certainly did.

Will came to him then, drawn by his smile, one hand resting on his heavy belly and the other reaching out to touch his cheek.

“What are you thinking?” he murmured, Hannibal’s stubble rasping against his palm.

“That my life was so empty before you,” Hannibal said, covering Will’s hand with his own. “That I will always be grateful that the gods gave me a chance to know you.”

Will smiled, a sad and soft smile that did not quite reach his dark eyes. “Do not speak as if you won’t return, Hannibal. Even a boulder’s strength has its limits.”

“I know,” Hannibal said, tugging Will into his arms, turning him slightly to make room for the baby’s bulk. “If something were to happen to me—”

“Hannibal,” Will said, stiffening in his arms.

“If something were to happen to me, Will,” Hannibal insisted, turning Will’s face to his, their eyes meeting and locking. “I want you to know that the very best and brightest part of my life has been you. I never lived until now, Will. I moved through my days like a ghost through empty halls, a meaningless existence without purpose or direction. You have given me purpose. You have given me faith and hope in the future of our family. You have given me love, Will, like I’ve never felt before in all my life... and I will always be grateful to you for that.”

Will blinked, tears slipping down the round curves of his cheeks, his full mouth trembling as he fought not to weep.

“If I don’t come back to you on my own two feet,” Hannibal whispered, kissing those tears away, tender and gentle with him, “I want you to know that I have loved you as deeply and fully and recklessly as any man has ever loved before, and I will always be with you. Always and forever.”

Will lifted his arms in silent pleading and Hannibal scooped him up, hefting him easily and carrying him to the bed, knowing neither of them would sleep tonight, but for all the wrong reasons.

zzz

The morning of Hannibal’s departure found Will downstairs before dawn, pacing in the library with Winston and Tier’s girls keeping pace with him, agitated by his nerves.

The moment he had dreaded was upon him, the shattering of his happiness and the loss of the comfort he had come to rely on. Much as he tried to resist it, his father’s hateful words haunted him with bitter truth and he found himself paying for the joy he’d dared to take, his defiance of the gods turned back on him, sharp and deadly with every intention to pierce him to the soul.

His eyes slid to the clock again. Hannibal had gone in to check on Grandfather almost half an hour ago, saying his goodbyes to the man who loved him so dearly, telling him he was taking a short trip and would be back soon, because the truth might honestly kill him after all.

Will had meant to accompany him, but found himself unable to in the end. He wasn’t sure he could bear to see it, wasn’t sure he could be strong for Hannibal when sadness threatened to crack him wide open, and Hannibal needed his strength now more than ever.

Will twisted his ring on his finger, his heart giving a sickening lurch when Mr. Hawkes said, “Lord Clarges is coming, my Lord.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, quitting the library and reaching the foyer just as Hannibal did.

They paused there for a moment, regarding one another, separated by so many things they couldn’t bear to say, fears that might come to pass if given a voice, hopes that might be dashed if they dared name them.

Everything that needed saying had been said through the night, whispered confessions of devotion and promises on every breath, a sacred moment where love was elevated to the divine and the altar at Will’s feet lay drenched in tears and promises.

And Hannibal Lecter always kept his promises. Will clung to that knowledge with all of his might.
“Yes, well... I won’t be long,” Hannibal said, at a loss for words as only Will could make him. He yearned to embrace him, but he feared doing so, feared he would defy King and country to stay at Will’s side, renouncing allegiance to all else but the love of his mate.

But seeing him there in the faint golden glow of the new gas globes, wan and thoughtful and on the cusp of abandonment yet again when he most needed his husband, Hannibal risked the consequences and pulled Will into his arms.

Their lips met with the echo of every kiss between them, a farewell woven of moments that formed a tapestry of love. Will felt the finality of that kiss and curled against him, fingers clenching in Hannibal’s lapels, surging up in his grip to remind him that this was not goodbye, never goodbye.

They were both left softly panting when a discreet throat clearing from Mr. Hawkes parted them, but neither of them paid any mind to propriety for the moment.

“I have something for you,” Will said, his husky voice soft but firm. He delved into his pocket and withdrew a watch. The cover was etched with something, and when Hannibal looked closer, his heart ached to see the familiar sight of Hartford House when viewed from the lane. “I never dreamed when I ordered it that you would be leaving, but I hope when you see it, you remember your home and the people here who love and need you.”

Will thumbed the catch, turning the watch to reveal a miniature version of his portrait opposite the watch face.

“I wanted to surprise you,” Will said, his smile pained and rueful. “I had no idea at the time that I would be sending you off to war.”

“Will,” Hannibal breathed, staring down at the painting which perfectly captured Will’s effortless strength, his beauty and grace, the slight stubborn tilt to his chin and the limpid turn of his eyes, as if a world of secrets lay behind the luscious curl of his lashes. He swallowed the lump that tightened his throat and whispered, “I will treasure it, Will. Gods, how I will treasure it.”

“Take care of yourself,” Will said, a plea made with aching tenderness, watching Hannibal exchange his old watch for the new one, clipping it onto the chain still laced with his blue garter.

“I have my defenses,” Hannibal said, resigned to the fact that he was returning to hell and might never make it out alive. What counted was before him—Will, their child, the happiness and contentment of his family and the surety for their future. “I have my Courtier’s token, I have the likeness of you to gaze upon when my spirits are low, but most importantly I have you.”

He pressed his hand to Will’s heart, then to his own, his smile sad but determined. “You’re here with me, and even in the darkest days ahead of me, I know you’ll be here waiting for me, and if that isn’t motivation enough to get me through a war, why then nothing is.”

Will smoothed Hannibal’s jacket, staving off the inevitability of letting him go, saying, “Perhaps I should come to the Capital with you? I could see you off from there?”

Hannibal, however, was already shaking his head, his lips thinning with pain.

“No, Will,” he said, reaching up to cup his cheek. “It would be even more impossible for me to leave you there. Let me carry this memory with me, the sight of you here at Hartford where you belong, smiling at me.”

“I love you, Hannibal,” Will said, the faint tremble in his voice nearly overcoming his husband’s best intentions.

“I love you, too, Will,” Hannibal murmured, pained as if a piece of himself was being ripped away, bleeding away his happiness to leave cold resignation.

Will stroked Hannibal’s hair when he bent to press a kiss to his belly, whispering promises to the baby within. It took every bit of his character, his sense of duty and discipline not to break into a thousand shattered pieces, but he was made of sterner stuff than that. It could come later, when Hannibal was gone, once Will was alone and no one would see how he wept, unraveling like a thread plucked from the loosened fabric of his hope.

“Come back safely to me,” he whispered, his pleading blue eyes meeting Hannibal’s as he straightened, “to us.”

“As you are my husband,” Hannibal said, kissing Will’s pale forehead one last time in parting. “I will do as you say.”
With a last, lingering brush of fingers, Hannibal pulled away, moving past him in an eddy of warm Alpha scent, striding from the House with his coat billowing around him.

Will turned, moving to the doorway to watch him mount up where Berger was already waiting. The lanterns cast a harsh glow in the predawn darkness, making mist of Will's breath in the cold air, and he shivered with misgivings, stroking his belly to comfort himself.

But when Hannibal got settled in his saddle and looked at Will, Will smiled as brilliantly as he ever had since Hannibal's return. It was his last smile, he knew, and he made it a gift to his husband, knowing the trials he faced in the coming days.

Hannibal pressed his gloved fingers to his lips and turned them towards Will in a kiss, and then he was off, spurring the horse down the lane as if the Devil himself were behind him.

He never looked back as he rode away.

But Will knew that he wanted to. More than anything, he wanted to.

An unexpected peace fell over Will in Hannibal’s absence, acceptance that there was no defiance he could manage which would bring his husband back to him. All he could do was maintain hope and keep his bond flung wide open.

He felt it pull tight and thin as Hannibal traveled away from him, but no matter how frayed and strained it might become, the bond they shared was too strong to break, and he took comfort in that. Whatever the future had in store for Hannibal, Will would know it should the worst happen.

He fed Grandfather breakfast to avoid his own, lacking any appetite. He would force himself to eat, he knew, for the baby’s sake if not his own, but for now the hollow in his stomach matched the hollow in his heart and he had no desire to disturb it.

“I’ll sit with him today, Mr. Zeller,” Will said when Roland’s valet came to collect his breakfast tray. There was a touching tenderness in the way Zeller wiped Roland’s mouth clean and tidied him, his affection surfacing more without the hard layer of carelessness disguising it. “Why don’t you take some air?”

“It’s snowing,” Zeller said, nodding at the windows, and when Will turned to look it was to find fat, fluffy flakes spilling from the heavens. “Pretty, isn’t it?”

Roland’s eyes slid to the window, the longing in him thick enough to taste. He was far too frail to be taken out there, however, and Will shook his head, saying, “As beautiful as it is, we’ll stay inside, you and I. We can read some more, if you like?”

Roland’s gaze immediately shifted to the translation, not to the books Will had brought to entice him.

“I’m not sure we should continue,” Will said, allowing Zeller to escape with the breakfast tray, leaving the two of them alone. “She speaks so harshly of you, I wouldn’t wish to upset you further, Grandfather. Not with Hannibal leaving for... business.”

Roland glowered at that, sensing he was not being told the truth but with no ability to argue the point. Will escaped his censure by pulling the translation free and flipping through it to the last few entries, hoping to spare him. She had not written daily, only when something momentous happened, or when she found her emotions too difficult to suppress, which often concerned all three Lecter men in her life. It made for interesting but quick reading at times, and somewhat disjointed in connecting events, but she always made her point, the Lady Murasaki.

“Very well,” Will said, finding a good place to start. “Just a little while, then.”

I am shaking as I write this. I hope whoever reads this when I am gone can see what I have written. We have returned to the Capital from the country at last. I came straight to write this, to put down my feelings before they could escape.

Everything was wrong.

Everything was backwards, and I never knew it. How was I to know it? Have I hated him all my life for the wrong reasons? Why must the gods play such bitter tricks on us when we have none of their capacity for understanding?
I spoke with Roland alone, not like last time, but truly, with purpose. After all this time, I finally listened to what he said, insults laid aside. He was so angry at first, so full of spirit it was almost as if he was Omegan—fierce and furious and ready to do battle.

Only, the battle was for what truly happened in my youth.

Prisoner—that is what he called himself. He did not stay by choice, but under my father’s watchful eye. The fondness that rose between us was encouraged by my father, another link in the chain that bound him. I chose him for my first heat because he was gentle, and careful, and always so willing to indulge me. I did not know then it was their custom here to treat Omegas as fragile flowers, delicate porcelain easily broken and needing protection. I thought it meant something it did not mean. I thought we both felt the same regard for one another. He found pleasure in our marriage bed but took no joy in it, a duty pressed on him by my father’s heavy hand.

He wrote to his people not for slaughter, but for escape.

And he wanted to take me with him.

He wanted to bring me here, to the world I now live in, and make me his wife by their custom. Raise our son together and many more after, to save me from the invasion he knew would come, inevitable in the way of their people—moving through the world to conquer and own through devastation.

Why do I weep as I write it? Why do I mourn for a past we have only barely survived? Why must what might be always seem so beautiful when compared to what truly is? Yet I cannot help but imagine how life would be for us now, had he dragged me here kicking and screaming to be his bride. The child of a conquered people, a curiosity, a relic of a world they eventually crushed to dust despite all our expectations.

He said the note he had sent reached no one. That instead it was my father’s demands which reached the ears of Roland’s King and his own father, and another King had been asked to solve it for a share of the spoils. He told me of how our Emperor saw a chance to be rid of the threat House Murasaki represented and gave the foreign soldiers permission to bring Roland out alive only if they destroyed everything else in their path and all who were loyal to our family.

I would not believe it, but I could taste the truth of his words. He was as frightened and in danger as any of us that night, not knowing they were there to rescue him. When the fighting started and he could not find me, he went to save our son, hoping to protect him. When I found him there, he begged me to come with him, but his words were all wrong. My words were all wrong. He thought I refused him, when I did not know there was even a choice to be made. He thought I chose to die rather than accept him, chose to sacrifice myself for my honor, even if our child would suffer for it.

The foreign soldiers would not listen, he said, and he wept as he told me. He wept before me, the enemy he has hated for so long. He said they would not stop, no matter how he begged them. They were not of his people, of his lands. They knew no more of his language than he knew of mine. They saw the man they had been sent to find, and all else was to be destroyed.

He said he thought I had died there when the shots were fired. He said he had died there with us, the part of him that loved us both. He said he never forgave me for the choice he thought I made, that my refusal delayed him long enough that the soldiers found us and murdered our child. He said he never forgave himself for Kohaku’s death.

I thought I could never forgive him either. Why must I learn this now? Why must my heart crack into pieces this way? My strength has deserted me. I have no will to press ahead. My vengeance has become a tiny coal in the furnace of my soul, glowing and waiting to be fed.

And I have nothing left to give it.

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Berger was as silent and grave as Hannibal on their journey, a pale and determined presence at his side, loyal to the end. It reminded Hannibal bitterly of the first time they’d gone to war. He’d been so intent on dying then, flinging himself into battle to erase his mistakes in his own blood, and Berger had waded through every misery in order to drag him back, time and again, urging him that his grief would pass. This time, Hannibal swore he would take no chances, because he would not have Berger there to watch his back and steer him towards caution.
The snow was falling thick and heavy on their arrival to the Capital, sooty gray by the time it landed on the grimy roads. Berger wordlessly took Hannibal's medical bag from him as they exited the station, preparing to go to Chelsea House and make sure things were ready for him there, even if he would not be staying long.

“Tell Black not to worry about feeding me, I’ll stop in my club for that,” Hannibal said, fishing his watch out of his pocket and pressing the spring to check the time against the great clock. Will looked up at him from the portrait and Hannibal swallowed hard, wondering if he would be able to bear to look before long, he already missed him so much. He closed the watch and slid it back into his pocket, hand trembling. “I’ll report for duty at the Ministry and make sure everything is finalized first. I’ve no idea when I’ll be in.”

“Yes, m’Lord,” Berger said, heading off, but he paused when Hannibal called to him.

“Berger... I appreciate everything you’ve done for me over the years,” Hannibal said, earnest. “I want you to go back to Hartford when I leave. I have a cottage there for you, and a pension in case I shouldn’t return. Here’s a letter of reference, if you would prefer to remain a valet. I know several gentlemen—”

“Here, now, that’s enough of that nonsense,” Berger said, clutching Hannibal’s medical bag to his chest and quivering with offense. “One war or ten, you’re my responsibility, my Lord. If you’re headed to the front, so am I, and I’ll not hear another word to the contrary.”

“I would never ask you to face such horrors again, Berger,” Hannibal said, holding his gaze. “Once was quite enough.”

“My Lord, when you shipped off all them years ago,” Berger said, his ruddy face set in a frown, “you was as broken as I’ve ever seen a man, out of your head with grief and looking for the gods’ own judgment. I did my best by you, looked after you as much as you’d allow for, followed you into the worst of it in hopes I could keep you alive, not because you were my better, but because you were my friend.”

Berger shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable with being so candid, but Hannibal himself was touched beyond measure, warmed by his confession.

“You had nothing to lose then, or imagined you didn’t,” Berger said, his frown turning thoughtful and determined. “Now you got everything to lose, and so does his Lordship. If you went off to war and something happened, something I might’ve prevented, I could never forgive myself, my Lord, thinking I’d left a friend in need to face his fate alone. If you go, I go with you, and that way we both know we’ve done all we can for the best, don’t we?”

It coaxed a smile from Hannibal and a small, pleased laugh, and he nodded, telling him, “Remind me to give you a raise, Berger.”

“If we come through this and get you back home to his Lordship,” Berger said, “you can give me all the raises you like!”

He took himself off into the crowd, the snow leaving a haze reminiscent of the morning fog that usually shrouded the Capital. Hannibal stared after him, his mind already beginning the painful process of bracing for the battlefield he had hoped to leave behind him.

And then he caught Will’s face in the crowd, a bolt of recognition that shocked him, out of place as it was.

Mina swept from a carriage on the street, scolding Ms. Speck all the while, a sizable lock box clutched in her gloved hand. The fur-trimmed collar of her traveling jacket framed her face, making her resemblance to Will even more stark. Hannibal stood unnoticed by her in the crowd, watching with curiosity as she turned towards the station, her blue eyes wild and frightened.

He wasn’t sure why he did so, but he followed her back inside. Perhaps it was how furtive she seemed, how hounded she appeared, armed with nothing but her expensive traveling clothes and that locked box. Ms. Speck struggled behind her with a trunk, and for Mina to travel with so little was shocking to him, frankly. She’d had trunks enough to require a second coach when she’d come to Hartford and had left with even more.

A child running through the station bounced against her and dashed off, sending the lock box spinning across the floor, accompanying her cry of dismay. Hannibal moved to retrieve it, both of them bending to reach it at the same time.

“Allow me, Lady Rathmore,” he said, gripping it and rising as she did.
Her mouth dropped open in surprise when she saw who held the box, her familiar blue eyes wide and shocked.

“Hannibal!” she said, and pressed her gloved hand to her bosom. “I thought you’d gone to war!”

“Did you?” Hannibal asked, cocking his head and even more curious when she flushed, a livid red rising on her cheeks.

“The papers announced it months ago,” she said, recovering somewhat.

“My deployment was delayed. I leave tomorrow morning, before dawn,” he said, turning the box in his hands to look at it.

“Are you hurt? He hit you quite hard.”

“No, I’m not,” she said, rapidly gaining control of her shock. “No, I’m fine, thank you. May I have my box, please?”

“A strange thing for a lady to travel with,” he mused, wondering why it was so light. “Have you absconded with your jewels, Mina?”

“No, Hannibal, don’t be silly!” she said, her trilling laughter high and nervous. “No, I’ve decided to visit father in Broadriver.”

“I take it your sister has come through her illness, then?” Hannibal inquired, entirely unsurprised by the confusion that colored her features. “Ingrid, was it? Will said you had gone to nurse her. I do wish you had written to him of her health. He does love his blood relations, however little you all deserve it.”

Her smile wavered, but she said, “Ingrid! Of course, how thoughtless of me not to write. She is very well, Hannibal, thank you. But I must be off. I wouldn’t wish to miss my train. Gretchen!”

“Yes, m’Lady!”

“Well,” Hannibal said, handing the box back to her with a small, tight smile. “Safe journey to you, Lady Rathmore.”

“And to you, Lord Clarges,” Mina said, taking the box with visible relief. “I hope you stay safe there in that horrid war! It is dreadful that you must abandon my Will yet again. I cannot imagine how he bears it, my poor darling!”

“With a good deal more grace than you could possibly conceive of, Lady Rathmore,” Hannibal said. “Give my regards to your father.”

Her full mouth pursed, her gaze turning assessing and sharp, but she held her tongue and turned on her heel, striding away from him to follow Ms. Speck towards the trains.

Will was silent for a long moment after finishing that page, Lady Murasaki’s words still haunting him.

My vengeance has become a tiny coal in the furnace of my soul, glowing and waiting to be fed. And I have nothing left to give it...

Grandfather made a soft noise, distressed, and Will saw that he was weeping, tears flowing down his temples to soak his silver hair.

“Oh, Grandfather, I am so sorry,” Will said, pulling his handkerchief out to wipe at Roland’s tears. “You had no idea, did you?”

Roland tried to speak, his mouth tight, but he could do nothing more than groan in pain, squeezing his eyes closed.

It wasn’t another event, or even a pain of the flesh, but of the spirit. A wound time had not healed, but had festered and scarred and hardened, only to open and bleed afresh all these years later.

“She never said anything?” Will asked, wiping his face with care for his delicate, paper-thin skin. “She never told you how terribly you’d misunderstood one another?”

Grandfather moaned, a strangled and pained sound, but the meaning was clear all the same, and Will breathed, “Of course she didn’t. It wouldn’t upset you so much to hear it if she had.”

He fetched a wet cloth and washed Roland’s face for him, humming a soft song beneath his breath as he did so. He dried him so he wouldn’t take a chill, and by then Roland had calmed, laying in his bed, thoughtful and half lost in the past.
Will put everything away and walked to the windows, giving him a moment to reflect. The snow had settled over every-thing, dusting the evergreens, laying mantles of white over the statuary in the gardens. A peacock strutted past the window, cawing its indignation at the state of affairs, leaving a trail behind it that slowly filled in.

Will touched the glass, the cold seeping in through his fingers. The baby hadn’t moved as much through the day, the exciting stimulus of Hannibal’s Alpha voice absent to provoke them. Will’s eyes misted thinking of his husband, of how the baby had disagreed with Will’s dinner last night and protested with all their might. Hannibal had crooned to them, pushing Will’s nightshirt up over his belly to lay his lips to Will’s skin. He’d crooned and purred and the baby had quieted, rolling against the place where Hannibal touched him.

‘That,’ Hannibal had said, grinning and proud, ‘was a bottom, I’m sure of it. Cheeky little child.’

Will almost laughed then recalling it, but it came out as a half-choked sob he quickly stifled, trembling on the verge of tears. He pushed away from the window, struggling to contain his grief lest it agitate Roland, and plucked up one of the books, saying with brisk, false lightness, “Let’s resume our novel, Grandfather, shall we? It will be luncheon soon. I believe Mrs. Pimms is making a special soup just for you.”

He settled in his chair, glancing up when Roland tapped his hand against the mattress, forcefully enough that it made noise.

When Will looked at him, brows drawn and curious, Roland deliberately pointed at the discarded journal.

“Grandfather, no,” Will said, firm. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Perhaps when you’re feeling better—”

“Just read it to him,” Zeller said, coming in with snow melting on his coat and his boots filmed with water. He eased his coat off as he approached, but his face was empty of his usual teasing, serious and calm as he said, “He needs to hear it, Lord Clarges. He’s needed to hear it for decades.”

Will’s dubious gaze moved from Zeller to Grandfather, who met it with staunch determination.

“Very well,” Will sighed, trading the novel for the translation. “But we only have a few pages left. I can’t imagine what you hope to gain from it.”

The next entry was the last, just as Will had predicted. It was written an unknown time after the previous. Chiyoh’s note in the corner referenced a date rendered illegible with tears that had spread the ink through the page, obscuring it.

“We are going to Hartford in the morning,” Will read, frowning when he realized the entry was so short. “I am going to tell Roland everything. We have both of us lived too long hating one another, betrayed by one another, trying to hurt one another. I will tell him that he was wrong. I will tell him that I did love him, as much as an impulsive youth can ever love anything beyond their own satisfaction. I will tell him that I did not refuse him, that I might have considered his offer had either of us the words we needed to make ourselves known. I will tell him that I forgive him and ask him to forgive me, and perhaps if we find peace then Kohaku can finally rest.

I have decided to give him what he wants. For years he has offered me money to leave his son alone, money enough to go back to Nippon and start again, far away from them all. I will accept his offer, but I have my conditions. He must take Hannibal to Hartford and keep him far from Cyrus. I have watched him all these years, watched him drift further and further from reach, silent and scornful and rightfully so. The strength I tried to give him was steeped in bitterness and bears a poisoned fruit—his hatred is my reward for my cruelty, no matter how I believed I spared him. I have broken something in him that I fear will never heal, destroyed an innocent faith in safety that no child should have taken from them. I can never ask his forgiveness; I do not deserve it and the gods themselves would not grant it, but I can ensure he is safe in my absence. I only hope his grandfather can give him the happiness he deserves. Whatever the outcome, he must not be left in his father’s hands if I am not there to protect him.

I will ask Roland to find Chiyoh, to deliver her to me so that I may take her with me when I go. And I will tell him that I am taking Mischa. She is mine, and mine alone. There is no place for her in Roland’s life, no place for her in this world, half of my blood, half of his, and born outside of any marriage they recognize. He will have his son, he will have his heir, and I will have our Omega to love. It is far too late for us to start again and we are both of us weary. Yet I find myself hopeful that
we can be happy at last, that my little fawn will grow to be a strong, proud stag, and that I will die in the lands that gave birth to me, a proud Murasaki to the very end."

Will lowered the paper in stark shock, breathing, “Grandfather, is this true?”

“Yes,” Zeller said, answering for him. He moved closer to the bed and heaved a sigh, his frown heavy and thoughtful. “Yeah, it’s true. You didn’t know that, old man, did you? You suspected about Mischa, but you didn’t know Murasaki wanted to make a deal.”

“Mischa was your daughter? But how? When?” Will asked, taking up the journal to thumb through it, looking for any clue she’d written of. “She never said, not once!”

“Probably worried Cyrus would find it,” Zeller said, gesturing at the pages. “By the end, she wasn’t worried anymore. She was leaving anyway, or thought she was.”

“That was the night, wasn’t it?” Will asked, holding Roland’s sorrowful eyes. “She came to make a deal with you, and instead ended up leaving, demanding to leave. Grandfather, what on earth happened?”

“Hannibal wanted Mischa. The old man wanted Mischa,” Zeller said, drawing Will’s attention once again. He offered Will a pale shadow of his usual irreverent grin and said, “Just after the accident that broke his back, he got so damned drunk he was lucky he was in a chair to start with. He told me all kinds of things he probably wished he hadn’t later,” he tapped his temple with one finger and added, “and I don’t forget, Lord Clarges.”

“Zeller, have you been blackmailing Grandfather all these years?” Will asked, taken aback, but he was relieved when Zeller only laughed and shook his head.

“No, I wouldn’t do that, my mother would haunt me and believe me, that’s the last thing I want,” Zeller told him. “No, we’ve got an understanding, the old man and I. He did a lot for my mom, a lot for me growing up and he still does. I told her I’d take care of him, and that’s what I do, even when that means listening to his nightmare stories about the family.”

“So he spoke to you of that night?” Will asked, reaching out to stroke Roland’s hair, trying to soothe the melancholy that had settled over him. Roland didn’t pull away from his touch, but he seemed lost somehow, adrift once more in a past that had dealt more pain than it had joy.

“Not much, but some,” Zeller said, and tugged on Roland’s sleeve, saying, “Can I tell him?”

Roland roused himself enough to blink hard, working to utter a little grunt that seemed to satisfy Zeller as assent.

“The three of them were staying here at Hartford overnight in the winter,” Zeller said, tipping his head up in thought as he recalled the details. “It snowed enough that it wasn’t safe to go. Cyrus got drunk and passed out. Hannibal was up in the nursery. I wasn’t even born yet.”

“Thank you, Mr. Zeller, I assumed so,” Will said, appreciating his attempt at humor even if he could not smile at it.

“She was up roaming the house and the two of them ran across each other, got into it like always,” Zeller told him, hesitating to say, “Well, you know how it goes sometimes, Lord Clarges. Some battles are fought best without clothes.”

Will blushed despite himself and dropped a look at Grandfather, bewildered but not surprised.

“He loved her, I think,” Zeller said. “Loved to hate her, or hated to love her, all twisted around and confused. He never told me so, but he talked about that night like he talked about Charles, that same kind of... something. You can’t hate somebody so much for hurting you if you never loved them, can you?”

“Did you?” Will asked, taking Grandfather’s hand in his. “Did you love her, Grandfather? As much as you could after Charles, after everything that had happened?”

A shimmer of tears and a shift of eyes was the answer he needed and he squeezed Roland’s hand, sighing, “How terrible. So you suspected Mischa was your daughter? Lady Murasaki came here to make her offer, but you had made a decision before hearing it—bring Hannibal to Hartford and Mischa along with him. Both children in one fell swoop.”

Roland’s fingers squeezed his in a spasm of helpless response.
“She panicked, didn’t she? She realized she couldn’t speak with you as she hoped or she thought you wouldn’t listen,” Will said, his mind painting a picture of frantıc movement, the Omega who had insisted they go despite the terrible storm, seeking to buy herself time and distance to come up with another plan, another way to escape without losing everyone she loved. “She realized you planned to take her child yet again, and she insisted they leave.”

“Yeah,” Zeller said, quiet and subdued. “That’s about it. They left, the coach went into the river, and Hannibal was the only one to make it out alive, and just barely. That was the first time he had an episode like this. My ma thought he wouldn’t pull through, but he did. And he’ll do it again, I know he will.”

Will kissed Roland’s hand and released it, tidying the pages of the journal and putting them back in their envelope. There was a great deal they had missed or skimmed past entirely, but those things could wait until later, until the letters he would write to his husband, relaying the events she spoke of, her regrets about Hannibal’s childhood and her efforts to secure his future happiness when his childhood was beyond repair. The greater story that had caught up the innocent lives of the Lecter children had unfolded in all of its tragic unhappiness and loss, leaving Will numb for fear of being consumed by his Gift.

“I am so sorry,” he whispered, bending to kiss Grandfather’s forehead, stroking his hair with gentle fingertips. “What terrible misery, to have lost so many children…”

First Kohaku, then Mischa and Cyrus years later in the same fatal accident that had claimed Lady Murasaki and nearly Hannibal, as well. That their losses were stepped in misunderstandings, that their deaths might have been prevented only made it all the worse.

“I think I need some air myself,” Will said, knowing that Grandfather was in the past somewhere, perhaps imagining his decisions with different outcomes, where his children lived happy, long lives. “Try to get some rest, Grandfather. The past offers no forgiveness that I’ve ever found, only guilt and frustration.”

He gestured the dogs to his sides and let himself out, drawing a breath that trembled, seeking the comfort of his mate’s earthy Alpha scent and finding only traces that teased but never satisfied, fading into nothingness as if never there at all.

His odd encounter with Mina left Hannibal unsettled as he left the station, lost in thought. He decided to walk off his restlessness, lacking the desire to flag down a cab or face the staff at Chelsea House in order to procure a mount. He checked in at the garrison and signed for his issue as well as for the freight that had already been shipped for him these past months. A stop at the Ministry proved fruitless as Sir Gregory was not in, but Hannibal left his card with the secretary and asked if Sir Gregory might call at Chelsea House that night. He visited Mr. Buddish, then the apothecary to restock his medical bag, and finally decided to indulge himself with a late lunch at his club.

He was very surprised when Berger came to find him there hours later, his round cheeks brick red with effort.

“Good gods, have you been running? What on earth for?” Hannibal asked, shocked by how disheveled he appeared. He gestured for water and the staff brought it immediately, waiting for Berger to swallow it down. “What’s happened, Berger? Is it Will? Grandfather? Speak, for heaven’s sake!”

“It’s been done, m’Lord!” Berger said, panting and ragged, half in a swoon. “Sir Gregory got your card and called, m’Lord! It’s all been done!”

“Go fetch my trunks back from the ship, Berger! We’ll return to Hartford the moment we can!” Hannibal shouted as he rushed out, using all of his strength to keep his boundless relief in check, lest Will sense it and later be disappointed. He urged himself to calm, trembling as he hailed a hansom to bear him to the address, which was the Ministry chamber.
The cab pulled into the late afternoon traffic, the pace almost unbearable. He anxiously peered out, his heart hammering with hope that it was true, that the war was over, that their soldiers would come home, and he would go home to Will. He would go home to Will and never leave him, not ever again.

It was enough to hasten his step on his arrival, heightening his senses and straining his nerves to the snapping point. He announced himself at the receiving desk and was taken at once to the crowded assembly hall where a good deal of shouting was going on.

The attendant threaded their way through the chaos to reach Sir Gregory, who excused himself, joining Hannibal with a wide smile on his lined face.

“Lord Clarges! It is very good to see you again,” he said, looking as relieved as he sounded.

“My valet was nearly in a swoon,” Hannibal said, retreating into reserve in case he had misunderstood, but the only thought he could keep hold of was of Will and how quickly he could return to him.

“We are all of us very hopeful,” Sir Gregory said, pleased enough that he seemed to expect good news. “Lord Withome of Kirk and Mr. Katz of the Merchants Guild have brokered the peace treaty, Lord Clarges, and it has been approved! The war will officially end when their Majesties sign.”

Hannibal’s smile turned into a delighted laugh, his relief given full rein and flooding him with trembles of spent tension.

“Gods, that is the best news! The very best news!” he said, hoping the evening train would not be too full to hold him, already envisioning how Will would react in his surprise. “Then my deployment?”

“Null and void,” Sir Gregory said with no small satisfaction, pleased with the turn of events.

“Then I must go at once!” Hannibal said, his relief almost breaking through the tight hold he kept on his emotions.

“Go? No! Not quite yet, Lord Clarges,” he was told. “I understand you have your spouse to get back to, but I wish to present you to the committee and finalize our plans while we all are gathered.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve sorted your paperwork problem?” Hannibal asked, dismayed to think he might not be able to immediately escape.

“I should say so, Rathmore has been arrested,” Sir Gregory said. “First thing this morning. We’ve kept it quiet to now, but I imagine it will be all over the papers by this evening.”

“Arrested? Was his wife present for it?” Hannibal asked, thinking of Mina as he’d last seen her, scurrying through the train station. “She is my husband’s sister, Sir Gregory. That is my only concern in the matter.”

“She was present, yes,” he said, reminded of the family connection Hannibal shared with the Rathmores. “She was warned not to leave the Capital, though there is little concern she was involved, considering.”

“Well, she listens to the law about as well as she listens to any good advice. She has left the Capital,” Hannibal said, a deep sense of unease gripping him. “I met her in the train station this morning. She said she was going to Broadriver, to her father.”

“I shouldn’t think she will find much shelter there,” Sir Gregory said, cocking a brow in scorn. “Rathmore is not a man designed to keep his secrets. He’s giving an accounting of his associates now, and the information supplied by His Grace also implicates Lord Reddig, to a degree. It is only a matter of time before he, too, is arrested, if the evidence supports it.”

Hannibal couldn’t get his mind off of that lock box Mina had been holding, couldn’t set aside the fear that suddenly gripped him in learning of Timothy’s arrest and what might have prompted her sudden escape to the countryside.

Missing letters, missing men, treason and murder attempts, and his mate left without his Alpha there at his side—it all pressed upon him with sudden urgency, an overwhelming understanding that whatever was in that lock box and whatever took her to Broadriver was connected to his mate.

“I am sorry, Sir Gregory, but I must go,” he said, moved to act on the sudden, unshakable certainty that Will was in danger.

“But Lord Clarges—”
“Please, arrange a meeting at a later date, Sir Gregory,” Hannibal said, the undertone of panic in his deep voice alerting the other Alpha that there was a serious problem at hand. “I fear that something terrible is afoot and my mate’s life might be at stake! I must go. I must go this instant!”

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It was a restless, unsettled day for Will. Not even a walk in the muffled silence of the snow could leech his strange unease, and being surrounded by guards didn’t help that one bit. He felt adrift, a boat without a paddle at the mercy of the current. Not even fetching one of Hannibal’s handkerchiefs had settled the odd dread that dodged him, no matter how often he nuzzled it in search of Hannibal’s scent.

Aunts Margaret and Grace passed a few hours with him, helping him finish at least one little gown and bringing a trunk of others—Hannibal’s baby clothing, kept safely stored all this time in the Fernhill attics. They entertained him with stories of Hannibal as an infant and spent some time with Roland, but returned to Fernhill before nightfall could make the snow-covered roads more difficult to traverse.

Just before sunset, as Will was heading in to write his first letter to his husband, the bond gave him a sickening, shocking thrust of pure terror and panic strong enough that he clutched for a handhold, heart hammering in fear of what had so affected his husband.

“My Lord!” Mr. Hawkes called, hurrying to grasp Will's hand, supporting him with an arm behind his shoulders. “You are unwell! Fetch me Mr. Price at once!”

“Mr. Hawkes, sir, someone’s come, sir!”

“Oh, bother that, his Lordship, is ailing!”

“It’s alright, Mr. Hawkes,” Will said, catching his breath and straightening. “Please, take their card. I believe I need to rest.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, concentrating on the bond, on the push of worry that seemed almost deliberate, as if Hannibal was attempting to warn him of something.

“My Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, returning to announce their visitor.

He was so vastly disapproving and unhappy that Will had to prompt him, asking, "Who is it, Mr. Hawkes?"

"Your sister," Mr. Hawkes said, and the bond gave a terrible, ugly pulse in Will’s chest. "Lady Rathmore has arrived, my Lord."

Chapter 55

Will knew without a doubt that something terrible had happened if his sister had returned to Hartford of her own accord. He drew himself together and hurried to the door, shocked when Tier’s girls began to bark and carry on as if they might eat her alive.

“Oh my gods, why are those things inside the house?” Mina shrieked, startled by the approach of the dogs. She drew up in terror, her eyes showing whites all around, a grimace of fear contorting her features.

They barked so viciously that Will worried for a moment that they might attack, but the large animals made no move to do so, only filled the room with their snarling displeasure.

“Girls! Goodness!” Will said, raising his voice to be heard above the din. He cast a glance back and gestured at Mr. Hawkes, saying once he was close enough to hear, “Take Winston and the girls upstairs for now, Mr. Hawkes.”

“Very good, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, his rumbling tone heard even over their angry snarls.

Will moved to console his sister as the dogs were pulled away, taking note of her travel-dusty dress, her tear-streaked face, and how deeply disturbed she was.
"How terrifying! Heavens! I thought they would devour me!" she said, trembling so hard she fumbled twice at her gloves before Will moved to strip them from her, first one and then the other as she shifted a large lock box from hand to hand. "How can you bear to have such monsters around you?"

"They aren't monsters, Mina," Will said, handing off her gloves. "They only attack when ordered to. You surprised them, that's all. You've surprised us all! What on earth has happened, my dear? You look so upset, and I know it wasn't the dogs."

"Oh, Will, it's just awful!" she sobbed, allowing Mr. Hawkes to assist her in removing her outerwear. "It's simply awful!"

"What? What is awful?" Will asked, distracted by the sudden movement of the baby. They kicked in agitation as if he'd eaten a whole jar of pickled eggs, a food they took enormous exception to. He rubbed where they pushed against him, wondering if the baby's disquiet was related to the growing fear rising through his bond.

"Oh, Will! I wish I was dead!" she cried, her sudden embrace unhindered by the firm grip she kept on that lock box she carried. "I wish I was dead!"

"Gods, Mina! Don't say such things!" Will scolded, horrified. He put his arms around her there in the foyer before the door and the embarrassed staff, wondering what on earth had happened, but the tremble that racked her slender body softened his impatience. She was delicate and fragile as a leaf in a storm, and it pained him to feel her so vulnerable. The defenses of her self-confidence and spoiled attitudes had been stripped away to leave her exposed and Will, ever her faithful defender, wanted nothing more than to protect her.

"Please, tell me, Mina," he coaxed, and when she only sobbed, he asked, "Did you come from the east? Have you traveled far?"

"No, I came from Broadriver," she said, snuffling delicately as she straightened. She seemed surprised by the size of his belly and was momentarily diverted from her abject misery, saying, "Goodness, look at you! You're big as a house!"

"It does tend to happen," Will said, refusing to be offended. He took her hand and said, "Mrs. Henderson, if you could get her ladyship's room prepared? Ms. Speck can see to the unpacking."

"Yes, my Lord," Mrs. Henderson said, gesturing for Ms. Speck to follow her, a footmanshouldering Mina's single trunk.

"Here, let them take this," Will said, reaching for the lock box, but Mina pulled it out of reach, refusing to part with it. Will gave her a suspicious look, asking, "Why are you so frightened, Mina? What's in that box?"

"Nothing, Will! Don't ask me such questions, I am much too distraught!" she said, fresh tears welling over. She wiped at them with her free hand, allowing Will to escort her to the stairs. She cried loudly all the way up and Will took her directly to her suite, unwilling to have her theatrics invade the calm comfort of his own or dare the presence of Tier's girls.

"Now," he said, settling her in front of the fireplace where a kitchen maid was already laying a fire. Staff busied about placing fresh linens and unpacking her solitary trunk, but they paid no mind to the Lord and Lady underfoot. "What's happened to upset you so, Mina? I have never seen you so beside yourself."

He eased down on the settee next to her, maneuvering his bulky belly with as much grace as could be expected. Once she put that odd lock box down on the floor, he grasped her hands in his and chafed them, trying to bring warmth back to her skin.

"I didn't know where else to go," she said, the words cracking on a sob. "Father will not have me, Will! It's just terrible, terrible!"

"Mina, please—"

"Timothy has been arrested!"

Will's stomach sank with realization that he dared not let show on his face. Feigning ignorance for her sake as well as his own, he said, "Arrested? On what charges?"

"Treason," she said, virtually shouting the word. She laughed, the sound half hysteria, and gestured at the servants, saying, "They shall hear all about it soon enough! The soldiers came for him and took him away! I was told not to go far, that they would wish to question me, but I panicked! I had Gretchen pack what she could in an hour and I fled from the Capital!"
“I was not aware you had even returned to the Capital,” Will said, confused by her actions. “How dreadful for you to witness such a thing, Mina.”

“I would not have returned, of course, except that he sent for me,” she said, tears running down her face, her upset at war with her offended sensibilities. “He said he had come into a great fortune and we were to leave the country immediately! That he had powerful patrons who wished to sponsor us on the Continent!”

“My gods, Mina,” Will breathed, the enormity of Timothy’s actions almost impossible to grasp, even for his expansive imagination. “I don’t know what to say. That is just... just awful for you—”

“I have nothing left, Will!” Mina sobbed, startling even Mrs. Henderson, who had nerves like steel. “Even Father refuses to tolerate me! I just... I just want to fling myself into the river and drown!”

“No, Mina, no,” Will said, trying to soothe her. “You can start over, I promise you can. We’ll seek a divorce to quietly separate you from Timothy and start reintroducing you to Society slowly.”

She sniffled, hiccuping and hitching with sobs.

“It may take some time,” Will allowed, rubbing her slender back with his hand, “but one day you will enjoy life again. Take pleasure in the small triumphs, Mina. I know you feel as if Hannibal dislikes you, but he would never turn his back on you, nor will I. You have a place here at Hartford for as long as you need it.”

“Oh, Will!” Mina said, flinging her arms around him in a fierce embrace. “I have no hope left! None at all!”

“We’ll find it for you,” Will said, rocking her and smoothing her hair, his heart aching for what she faced.

“You’ve always been so good to me, Will,” Mina whispered, her voice thick with tears. “If I could spare you any pain at all, I would. You do know that, don’t you?”

“Mina, don’t be silly,” Will chided her. “I know you would do anything for me, just as I would for you. Now, go have a bath and let Ms. Speck bring you a tray so you can get some rest. We won’t be doing a formal dinner, all things considered.”

“Things?” Mina asked, tugging free of his arms to wipe her face with her handkerchief. “What do you mean?”

“Grandfather is very sick,” Will said, solemn and hesitating to add more. It physically hurt him to admit, “and Hannibal has returned to the front.”

“Returned to the front?” Mina asked, the very picture of bewildered horror. “He has gone back to war?”

Will felt strangely chastened by that and quietly answered, “Yes.”

“Good heavens, that war would be his preference to pass the time until the baby is born!” Mina said, sidetracked from her misery by Will’s own. “Fleeing from your side to risk his life in battle. Honestly. What will people think?”

Will flinched, and softly admitted, “I couldn’t give two figs for what people think,” his heart giving a painful clench when Hannibal’s throaty Alpha voice purred in his memory, ‘Two, always only two...’

“Oh, darling, no! Of course not! Oh, how terrible,” Mina said, retreating behind her handkerchief. “Pay no mind to your silly sister, Will! Only do send my regards to His Grace. I do hope to see him very, very soon.”

Will left her with a kiss to her trembling hand, assuring her, “Things will be much better come the morning.”

“Yes, my darling,” Mina said, managing a beautiful smile for him that still seemed so terribly sad. “I truly believe they will.”

Jimmy was in Will’s suite when he arrived, scolding the girls, “You can’t behave like this! I am very disappointed in you ladies! And Winston, I thought you were your own man—”
“Have I come at a bad time?” Will asked, tipping slightly to reach the excited dogs as they swarmed him. Winston was more uncontrolled in his reception, but Tier's girls pushed up against him with care of their large size, chuffing their pleasure at seeing him.

“I honestly have no idea why they're so on edge,” Jimmy said, hands on hips. “They're very nervous about something.”

“Well, then we shall be nervous, too,” Will said, shedding his jacket with a sigh. Even the loose, open folds of his maternity wear felt stiffly formal now and he longed for the soft, engulfing linen of his husband's nightshirt. “My sister's arrival is enough to set the whole house on its head.”

“I heard she arrived,” Jimmy said, his neutral tone not fooling Will in the least. He came and took Will's jacket, replacing it with a light, warm shawl to keep the chill off. “Will she be staying?”

“For now,” Will said, pushing his shoes off with a wince and wiggling his sore toes in his fine stockings. “If I don't stop swelling, I'll have to go barefoot before long!”

“Here, put your feet up,” Jimmy said, guiding him to sit. He got Will settled on the settee and put a cushion under his feet before he covered him with a lap blanket. “You just relax and I'll see what Mrs. Pimms has ready for you. Is there anything you'd prefer?”

“No, I don't think so,” Will said, staring at the fire dancing in the fireplace. “I don't have much of an appetite, Jimmy.”

Jimmy patted his leg with a fond, sad smile and said, “I don't expect you do, my Lord. He'll be back in time for the delivery, I just know it. He's the only other person in this world whose determination rivals yours, my Lord.”

A soft knock sounded, sending the dogs into a chorus of barking that gave Will an ugly start. He hushed them as Jimmy answered it, surprised to see one of the new guards, Mr. Danvers, follow his valet into his suite.

Concerned, Will asked, “Yes? What is it?”

“Just some information, your Lordship,” he was told, almost reluctantly. “Harris and Forbes haven't come back.”

“I beg your pardon?” Will asked, cocking his head. “From their rounds, you mean?”

Mr. Danvers nodded, fearful. “I've sent two men out to look for them, but they haven't come back either, my Lord.”

“Gods,” Will breathed. “When did you send them? When did they go missing?”

“Harris and Forbes didn't show for shift change just before her Ladyship arrived, my Lord,” Mr. Danvers said, steady despite his anxiety. “It's been since then that the others haven't reported back.”

“I'll get Mr. Hawkes,” Jimmy said, moving at once to go fetch the aged butler.

“You change shifts every two hours?” Will confirmed, the anxiety from his bond only adding to his own, which was growing by the heartbeat. “Would they have gone to see anyone? Finished their shift and gone to the pub instead of reporting? Is there any explanation you can consider?”

“They're good men, steady men,” Mr. Danvers said. “So no, m'Lord. If they haven't shown for shift change, something's kept them from it.”

Mr. Hawkes arrived in all haste with Mrs. Henderson in tow and Jimmy trailing behind, all three of them tense as coiled springs.

“Mr. Hawkes, Mrs. Henderson,” Will said, swinging his feet down from the pillows to sit up straight, his belly working against his dignity, “I believe we might have a problem.”

The butler came to immediate attention, ready and waiting for the worst.

“Mr. Danvers has informed me that four of our guards have gone missing within the last three hours,” Will said, his anxiety fading to sharp determination in regards to his staff. “I want no one going out and I want the House sealed before dusk from now on. Mrs. Henderson, inform everyone that if they need some air, they may open their windows or use the balconies off of the third floor.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Mrs. Henderson said, drawing up with purpose.
“Are there men enough to fetch Peter up to the House?” Will asked, addressing Mr. Danvers.

“If I may, my Lord?” Mr. Hawkes cut in. “Since Mr. Brown has gone missing, Peter secures himself and the stable lads at night upstairs in his room. I believe the dogs will alert him to anyone attempting to reach him. Peter will be safe, my Lord. It is His Grace and yourself we must save our worry for. If four men have gone missing, I would not risk more in attempting to reach the stable.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” Will said, reluctant to abandon Peter to a danger he might not be aware of, but certain that Athena and the others would alert him to any disturbance. He reached out and Winston pushed beneath his fingers, offering the comfort of his presence and reassuring Will that he was not without protection. In all honesty, Will felt much safer with his brave little dog than he did a whole sea of men like Mr. Danvers, especially with Hannibal’s anxiety weighing on him as it did.

“Secure the house,” Will said, firm and determined. “At first light I want no less than six men sent down to the constable, Mr. Danvers. He should be informed that there is a possible greater threat against Hartford House. We will search for the missing men tomorrow. I want all staff moving in pairs. I apologize for the inconvenience, but they must take no risks with their safety. I couldn’t bear it if something happened to anyone else under our protection.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Mr. Danvers said, Mr. Hawkes and Mrs. Henderson echoing him, and the three hurried to do as they were bidden.

“Jimmy,” Will said, turning his attention to his valet. “Please go inform Mr. Zeller of what’s happened.”

“Yes, m—” he cut off, sighing when the girls began to bark again, their hackles raised. “Yes, my Lord. I’ll take these two with me. They can patrol the halls until they calm down a little. We’ll bring your tray up in a bit and maybe then they’ll be less restive.”

“Thank you,” Will said, rubbing his forehead where a headache threatened, worsened by the dogs’ deep, baying barks. “If there is someone roaming around Hartford House, I would prefer the girls find them before they find us.”

Jimmy urged the nervous dogs out of the door, leaving Will alone with Winston, who looked fairly at a loss to be deprived of his friends.

Will pushed to his feet and went to the small cabinet Hannibal had purchased for him, which held his gifts and mementos with room for more. He cranked the music box and settled back down on the settee with a sigh, absently stroking Winston’s head with one hand and his belly with the other. He reached for the bond, trying to draw the dread and fear from Hannibal, trying to soothe him, but all it fed him was growing, panicked desolation.

The moon was on the rise as Hannibal hurtled towards Chesterton, pacing the small confines of his private compartment in first class to keep his fear at bay. The train had not left immediately from the Capital and it had been all Berger could do to convince him to wait for the next departure. He’d wanted to leave that instant, to take mounts from Chelsea House and ride at breakneck speed for Hartford, changing horses along the way.

But sense had prevailed, Berger’s anguished reminder that, even running late, the train would save him hours and miles of travel and still get him home before any number of horses could.

He dropped onto the plush seat, elbows on knees and head in hands. He reached for Will, reached for him through a bond that would never be whole. He defied what little knowledge he had of it, defied the voice that whispered it was impossible, and he had faith in his husband instead. Faith that Will was there, silent and receptive at the other side of their bond, attuned to him in ways even Hannibal himself could not grasp. He felt the tug and pull of his emotions, the slow easing of his sharp fear, and he knew Will was aware of it, was actively trying to comfort him.

Heartened that he might be able to fold his tumultuous emotions into a warning, Hannibal closed his eyes, concentrating his whispered words into a feeling.

“She is dangerous, Will. She means you harm. Please do not let her in!”
The train slowed, the abrupt braking jostling him from his seat. He gained his feet and snatched his medical bag up, striding down the passage towards the nearest exit, waiting with impatience for the train to pull into the station.

The moment it stopped, he burst out onto the platform in a frenzy of movement, running swiftly towards the nearest posting house with Berger hot on his heels.

Will had fallen asleep despite himself, draped over the settee with Winston snoring beneath the brush of his fingers where his arm hung down. It was dark already, and Jimmy had turned up a lamp near Will’s small table where a tray was waiting for him, the soft glow warm and inviting in the otherwise oppressive darkness.

It took him a moment to get his bearings, the vestiges of sleep feeding him the formless shape of his nightmares. Dangerous, he remembered that much, the soft purr of his husband’s voice thick with fear. Someone was in danger.

“Of course someone is in danger! He’s gone to war,” Will murmured to himself, sitting up with a wince as his spine creaked, the settee no substitute for a proper soft bed. “I doubt that will be the last bad dream I have in store for me.”

He blinked owlishly, trying to clear his head from the haze of sleep and the whispered warnings he recalled only in snatches, unintelligible but filling him with anxiety that even disturbed the baby. Will stroked his belly to calm them, pleased when they settled beneath his touch and the soft hum of his voice.

He eased to his feet, pressing on the small of his back as he moved towards the tray, shaking his head against a yawn.

“How odd,” Will murmured, finding only a pot of cooling tea with a cup and sugar bowl, not even a biscuit to tide him over, which was very unlike Jimmy. But they had experienced a great disruption to the household this evening with Mina’s arrival and the disappearance of the guards. A dinner tray was the last concern on anyone’s mind, Will’s included, but he was thirsty enough to sit down to the meager offering despite how little he wanted it.

He poured himself a cup, adding a spoonful of sugar and stirring it, wondering why it felt as if the bond was strengthening when Hannibal was so far away. Still, it poured into him with a ceaseless level of worry that he began to fear was the new normal for war, disturbing as that thought was. He didn’t dare try to close it, though, not even for the baby’s sake.

“Be careful,” he murmured to him, delving into the bond to soothe his husband as best he could. “Come back to me safely...”

He sipped his tea, the sweetness contenting him for now, growing more relaxed with each sip despite the many worries that plagued him. Grandfather, Hannibal’s deployment, the sudden disappearance of the men who were meant to protect him—it all weighed on his mind, but felt strangely distant to him as he finished the last swallow, wincing at the sudden bitterness hiding beneath the sugar he’d added. Lethargy crept up on him in a sudden flush and he shook his head, trying to dispel it.

It was a minute, subtle shift of reality out of true that made Will realize something was horribly amiss. The shadows seemed to pool in the corners of the room, growing thicker and more solid when he peered at them, pulling the dying glow of the fireplace down a pitch-black tunnel. Startled, Will stirred to approach it, his foggy head unable to make sense of it, his heavy limbs resisting his desire to move. He looked over at Winston, but the dog just looked back at him with his usual interest, no sign of distress about him.

But something was terribly wrong.

Will stood slowly, swaying as if drunk, everything tipping and tilting and curling in on itself. He groped to steady himself, trying to keep his footing as the world buckled around him. The light from the lamp fractured into a million glowing fireflies, swarming around with a soft buzzing like flies around carrion. Will stared in horror as a shadow pulled itself free of the darkness, branching ebon horns raking gouges in the walls that bled black rivulets to the floor.

Winston barked in alarm, the sound coming from the bottom of a well, hollow and ringing in his ears. Will dragged his gaze to the teacup, the effort monumental and slow. He watched it slip from his numb fingers, drifting through the air to spread itself over the floor in a mosaic of jagged pieces.

“There, there,” the shadow said, peeling its skin off before his horrified eyes to reveal his twin, a mirror staring back at him, hair shorn to match his own, her smile studied and serene. “Never fret, my darling. We will set things to rights as they should be. As we should have done from the start.”
A beast uncoiled from behind her. Its heat flowed across the floor in a spill of brimstone and sulfur, mouth disgorging a billow of steaming smoke into the darkness as it came at her command. Its wings stretched towards the edges of the room, glowing like the heart of a livid coal, filling Will’s petrified, disbelieving eyes with its presence.

“We’ll make sure you never suffer again, Will,” Mina crooned, her smile distorting into a river of sharp teeth eager to gnaw on him. “Won’t we, Francis?”

Hannibal Lecter rode for Hartford as if his life depended on it, his fear for Will escalating to terror, as if some terrible tragedy had already overtaken his mate.

Miles away at Hartford, a resounding knock came at the front door, loud and insistent. Mr. Hawkes, quietly appalled that any uninvited person would be so ill-mannered as to beat on the door of a Duke after all reasonable visiting hours, took himself to the door and opened it, gazing out at the group of men on the doorstep with bland disinterest as he said, “His Grace is not accepting visitors.”

“Wait!”

Mr. Hawkes stiffened, recognizing the voice as Lord Reddig’s. He was too old a hand at his job to betray his thoughts on his face, but that could not prevent the frown that tightened his mouth.

“You will allow us entry into Hartford House by order of my son, William Lecter-Graham, in whose hands the disposition of Hartford House currently lies,” Statton said, puffing his chest out with importance as he waded to the head of the group. “We have come at his request to take an assessing of the goods.”

“I doubt that very much, my Lord, and unless you have paperwork to support your claim, I refuse to soil his Lordship’s ears with such nonsense!” Mr. Hawkes said, his poise slipping in a flash of temper. “I suggest you take yourself down to Town and sleep it off!”

“You will hold your tongue!” Mr. Hawkes said, and Mrs. Henderson peered over his shoulder, watching the exchange with piercing worry. “Give me that paper!”

It was handed over with a small smile and Mr. Hawkes read it by lamplight, paling to see his Lord’s writing requesting just such a thing.

“I am going to speak to his Lordship of this,” Mr. Hawkes said, waving the paper in a fury. “And we shall see what he has to say!”

“You do that,” Statton called, sneering at Mr. Hawkes. “We have the legal right to enter, and enter we shall! These constables will make sure of it!”

“We. Shall. See,” Mr. Hawkes said, and slammed the door in their faces, throwing the lock with trembling, righteous anger.

“What do we do?” Mrs. Henderson asked, wringing her hands as more staff came to see what the matter was, all of them anxious and on edge.

“Jimmy,” Mr. Hawkes called, waiting for the worried valet to come closer. “His Lordship?”

“In his suite fast asleep when I last checked on him,” Jimmy said, flinching when Tier’s girls began to bark, hackles raised and eyes trained on the doors. “I was holding his supper tray until he woke, but I think we’d best wake him now.”
“Yes,” Mr. Hawkes said, grim. “I think we better had.”

The Great Red Dragon that Will had once seen pushing against the seams of Francis Dolarhyde at Marsham Heath now engulfed him, engulfed them both. Its scaly arms closed around him and kept him upright, hard and set as stone around him, burning and sparking with embers against his vision.

Will fought against the hallucinations that had been forced on him, against the lassitude that stole his strength and the fear that spiraled his heart into a pounding rhythm, one thought burning in his mind—protect the baby. Protect the baby.

He tried to move, tried to struggle against the binding of the Dragon around him, but his body would not obey him. Tears of frightened frustration escaped him when his gaze found the swell of his round belly, terror that his child was so still. He reached for Hannibal in a blind panic, Omegan instincts seeking the Alpha who was to protect him, and through the overwhelming terror that consumed him, he felt one tiny spark of hope in the depths of his bond.

I am coming to you. I am coming to you.

It had the staccato of Hannibal’s heartbeat, the strike of hooves on cobbles, the whistle of the wind and the brush of falling snow. Hannibal was coming for him. Somehow, he knew. Somehow, he was tearing towards Hartford like a man possessed, not even the Gods themselves able to stop him.

Will wept with relief, clinging to his faith that Hannibal always kept his promises, the hope that he had once despaired of now rising to sustain him.

“Open his mouth,” Mina instructed, and Will grit his teeth as his head was tipped back against Francis’ naked shoulder, his jaw trapped in powerful fingers. He gathered his sense enough to evade it as best he could, but Mina poured more sweetened tea down him, crooning, “This is for your own good, Will. We can’t have you kicking up a fuss, hm?”

Winston whined, hesitating to defend him against people he knew, people Will had always insisted he behave towards, but his ears lay flat against his skull and his tail was tucked against his hindquarters as he watched, nervous and afraid.

Will gagged on the tea but most of it got down him, the rest splattering over his chin and running down his throat. He focused hard on the details surrounding him, fighting the illusory effects, trying to look past the cavorting shadows and wavering walls that threatened him with terror to seize on the smallest trace of reality.

Mina had dressed herself in one of his nightshirts, donned his robe and tied it just as he always did, and to Will’s drugged mind it seemed he stood outside of himself, watching his own pregnant, heavy body being held by a monstrous beast with ill intent. It was so disturbing and disorienting that for an instant Will entirely doubted his own identity, but driving back that uncertainty was Hannibal’s deep, soothing voice whispering, ‘Every bit of you is the treasure I hoard, and I am greedy for you…’

He was Will Lecter-Graham, an Omega who had not once hesitated either to slap an Alpha with a trout or face a murderer to save a child. He had lived through Statton Graham, walked in the mind of Garret Jacob Hobbs, and driven Mason Verger away with a plank of wood and an angry stray. He was so much stronger than anyone ever expected, but even he could not do this alone. He needed his mate’s strength to draw on, and Hannibal gave it without reservation.

“W-why—” It was all his numb lips could manage, a question all on its own. Francis’ heart beat against him, the hollow boom of an empty drum that never wavered from its rhythm, nearly deafening in its strength.

“Sh, hush,” Mina soothed, moving to smooth his hair, her fingers curving into talons that Will recoiled from, eyes wide. “It will all be over soon, Will. I promise. My clever boy, you were so difficult! Always so difficult!”

She heaved a sigh, vanishing into the gaping maw of his dressing room to emerge with something white and writhing. It was one of her nightgowns, a frothy, lacy concoction that swirled as she carried it towards them, telling Francis, “Put this on him.”

“No!” Will snarled, determined to fight them no matter the nightmare realm he found himself in, refusing to be distracted from the very real danger he faced by the way the walls shifted and cracked, as if Hartford was crumbling down around their heads.
If he could fight them, if he could delay whatever they had planned, then maybe, *maybe...*

Francis bore him to the ground to strip his clothing from him and it was too much for Winston—he set on the large Alpha, snarling and trying with all his might to drive the man back from his distressed master.

Francis growled, seizing the dog by his ruff, and Will found the strength to shout, “*No!*”

“Put it in Hannibal’s suite; we’ll dispose of it later,” Mina snapped, pointing towards the washroom. When Francis departed, dragging the snarling, angry dog with him, Mina knelt down at his side and cupped Will’s cheek, breathing, “You know, this would have been so much easier months ago, Will. I tried to get to you before Hannibal returned, but that man moves quickly when he chooses, doesn’t he?”

Will bared his teeth at her, sprawled on the carpet right where the broken teacup lay a short reach away. He lost the thread of his thoughts in the jumbled horror of his surroundings, his confusion rising as the drug flooded his system, but his eyes fastened on the broken porcelain as Mina began to open his clothing.

“I should have married Hannibal from the start,” Mina murmured, stripping his stockings from him and flinging them into the open dressing room door. “You realize that, don’t you? I should be a Duchess in waiting, not you. It was a mistake to send you here, where that man abused you so terribly, Will, a mistake I am determined to remedy.”

Will forced his shaky fingers across the carpeting towards the sparkling shards of the broken teacup, his breath coming in harsh, shuddering pants. The floor seemed to bow away from him, curving into a horizon lost in bleak shadows. He blinked hard against it, shapes shifting and distorting until he wasn’t sure why he reached, only that he had to, for the baby’s sake he *had* to.

“At first, I hoped to trade you places again,” Mina sighed, resting her hand on the swell of his stomach when it was exposed, cupping her palm over him to rub his taut skin. “Oh, we had it all worked out, didn’t we? Me visiting, losing my mind in the most *spectacular* fashion. Had we succeeded, you would have spent the rest of your life in an asylum as me, protesting your identity while Timothy and I enjoyed the wealth of Hartford House. But that husband of yours threw things all off course, didn’t he?”

The sudden surge of sulfurous scent made Will gag, retching as Francis returned to crouch at his feet, helping Mina to undress him.

“But there was no turning back,” Mina sighed, dragging the clothing away as Francis removed it, flinging it all away to be devoured in darkness. “So, off I trotted, hoping to get us back on track, but you wouldn’t *drink the tea*, would you? No, of course you wouldn’t! It was too bitter for your tastes. Gods, how you frustrate me! Do you know how difficult it was to get hold of that Addendum, Will? Mason spent *hours* every single day going through the correspondence from this house—he *still* does—just to find something useful! And you *ignored* it! Completely ignored it!”

She heaved a sigh as if he’d been a wearisome child plaguing her.

“We cut your girth strap, you forgive him,” she said, her voice falling to a cold purr. “I shove you down the stairs, you survive it. Mason pins a note to the door with a dagger—somewhat theatrical, I know, but he tends to the dramatic—and you flee *with* your husband! Honestly, Will! How were we to frame Hannibal for your murder when you refuse to cooperate? Typical Omega, clinging to an Alpha, even one who wishes you were dead.”

She surged to her feet, drawing her fingers through her hair and moving to the lamp to turn it off, plunging them into complete darkness. Moonlight seeped in through the windows in tendrils, pale light wisping around Will’s vision like trailing spiderwebs, picking out the white shards of the teacup, reminding him that he had to reach.

“Is there any way in which you are ever reasonable, Will? Predictable in the least? Even I never *dreamed* you would *align* with him! That terrible man! That you would sign those awful papers and just-*just* *give it all away!*” she said, turning away to look down at him again. “I was frantic, wasn’t I?”

Will’s head lolled on a rush of nausea as Francis dressed him in Mina’s nightgown, tugging the folds around him and laying him back with care, Will’s arm outflung towards the shards. He did not notice how Will reached, intent as he was on tying the tiny ribbons, concentrating on dressing Will properly as if the perfection of his work might prove his loyalty. “Then
along came the baby. That little heir, hm? That little darling who would have it all, or take it all. When you said you were pregnant, Will, I knew I needn’t worry anymore... merely wait.”

She slipped back across the floor towards him, kneeling at his head to arch over him and kiss his forehead. She held his face in her hands, the fall of her thick hair snaking down towards him, thorny vines to rake his skin with ill intent.

“I will take him,” she whispered, smiling as if she had told Will her dearest, most beloved secret. Her face was a gaping, empty skull with sharp teeth set in a rictus, monstrous and terrifying. “I will raise him to love me above all others... and when Hannibal is gone, and His Grace is gone, I will see to his interests until he is of age and by then... why, who knows?”

Will stared at her in horror, tears streaming from his eyes, his fingertips brushing the sharp edge of a teacup shard. He clutched it, gathering his strength and his will and his desperate need to protect his child and distilling it into one lunging movement.

He nearly took out her eye, his attack was so unexpected by any of them, snarling in a fury as his momentum threw him over onto his side, gasping and panting.

Mina jerked back on a startled shriek, the jagged edge of the shard opening the skin at an angle from her temple to her cheek, blood springing to the surface in its wake. She pressed her hand to it, outraged and infuriated, but when she moved to strike Will, Francis snatched her wrist and squeezed until she winced, warning, “Don’t touch him.”

He didn’t raise his voice above a whisper, but it might have been a shout for the way Mina paled, perhaps doubting her hold on the dragon entirely.

There was a creak on the landing and they both froze, Mina’s head whipping in the direction of the door.

“Quick, into the dressing room,” she hissed, and flung herself at Will’s bed, mounding a pillow over her stomach as she pulled the covers up, tucking her face against the pillows where the shadows lay thick.

The floor pitched and tossed as Francis hefted Will up and he hung half senseless in the Dragon’s venomous embrace, the second dose and his spurt of effort draining him of his energy. The dressing room was dark as pitch, as death itself, the crack of the door the only faint light. Will tried to go to it, seeking escape from the prison of shadows, but he couldn’t move, couldn’t seem to pull himself free of the mire that held him.

“Heavens, it’s very dark in here, my Lor—Winston, what on earth?” Jimmy said, startled when the dog scratched at the washroom door, whining and upset. “Where did that tea tray come from? Oh, heavens, have you cut yourself? When did this happen? Here, let me just turn this light on—”

“No Jimmy,” Will heard himself say, as if he’d been split in two and some wretched version of himself lay in his bed, twisted and spiteful and bleeding onto his sheets from the wound he had dealt himself. “I have a terrible headache, please leave the lights off.”

Will felt Jimmy’s hesitation like a breath of fresh air, an eddy of hope that he would sense something wrong, that he would realize it was not Will in that bed, but an imposter sent to deceive him.

“Very well,” Jimmy said, reluctant and uneasy. “Lord Reddig is here, my Lord. He says he came at your bidding to—”

“Assess the furnishings for auction?” Mina said with his voice, with his voice to his valet, scooping all that he had worked for into her greedy maw, reaping the rewards of his labor as she always did.

Will whimpered, but it was muffled against a palm clamped over his mouth, salt and leather and ash against his lips.

“Sh,” Francis whispered, a near soundless purr in his ear. His other hand was over Will’s belly and the baby kicked, rejecting the touch instinctively. Will wept to feel it move within him, unharmed by the drug they had given him, the child’s resistance renewing his determination to carry on through this awful nightmare.

“Y-yes, my Lord,” Jimmy said, fairly at a loss as his Lord gave him an answer he did not expect.

“Let him in,” Mina said, pushing deeper into the bed. “Tell him I am feeling unwell and won’t be down to see him, and he should tend to things as he sees fit.”

“But, my Lord!” Jimmy said, absolutely aghast. “You cannot mean—”
“Please, don’t argue with me, Jimmy,” Mina said precisely in Will’s soft tone of pleading, with just his faint air of firmness. “Please, just do as you’re told.”

After a long, solemn silence, Jimmy said, “Of course, my Lord.”

“And Jimmy?” Mina said, calling him back as he made to leave, “Take the dogs down to the stable. I cannot bear the racket they’re causing.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Jimmy said, sounding as stiff and formal and disapproving as Will had ever heard him. “I’ll just get Winston.”

The hope that he would be found blew out like the flame of a candle, sudden and definitive as Jimmy gathered Winston up and left Will there; just himself, the growing hallucinations, his twin, and that terrifying red dragon.

He closed his eyes on a spill of angry tears and reached for Hannibal with his remaining strength, silently begging, ‘Hurry! Hurry!’

zzz

“Mr. Hawkes! Mr. Hawkes! Something is wrong,” Jimmy said, hurrying towards the group of gathered staff with Winston in tow.

“Winston?” Mr. Hawkes said, surprised to see the anxious little dog at Jimmy’s side. “Why is he not with his Lordship?”

“He was locked in the washroom. His Lordship asked me to take him away,” Jimmy said, flummoxed. “He wants all of the dogs taken to the stable.”

“What?” Mrs. Henderson said, aghast. “After locking the house up?”

“This is very Irregular,” Mr. Hawkes said.

“He’s not himself,” Jimmy told them, concern pinching his pleasant features. “Something is very wrong. He said to let them in, Mr. Hawkes.”

“He said to—” Mr. Hawkes drew up, completely stunned. He drew a breath, turning to look at Mrs. Henderson, who stood steadily beside him despite her worry. “Here, take my keys. Lock every cabinet in every room and every door to every room and every hall, and then I want you to hide both sets of keys, Mrs. Henderson. Hide them very well, indeed.”

Mrs. Henderson took the ring of keys without hesitation and handed them off to her head housemaid, saying, “You heard. Start here, I’ll take the east wing.”

“I guess I’d better have someone go with me to the stables,” Jimmy said, his dismayed gaze on Winston, whose reunion with Tier’s girls was subdued, to say the least.

“You will do nothing of the sort!” Mr. Hawkes said, jowls aquiver. “Something is not right here! His Grace is too fragile for this situation and his Lordship is clearly ill with grief since his husband’s departure! He cannot possibly realize what he has given permission for! You must go to him at once, Jimmy. He cannot be left alone.”

The gathered staff stared at him in awe, never having seen the dignified butler so utterly beside himself.

“No, this will not do,” Mr. Hawkes announced, his sonorous voice carrying through the halls of Hartford House. “Something has been afoot for a very long time now, and we are about to let the cause in through our very own front door!”

He looked at them one by one, finding only agreement in every pair of eyes he met.

“Break before bending is the motto of the Lecter family,” he reminded them, drawing up to his full, impressive height. “Hartford House is under attack and we have a duty to our family to protect it in their place! And I, for one, would rather break before we give those bastards an inch!”

zzz

They had to change horses just outside of Hartford Town, Hannibal was forcing them so hard, but he could not keep himself from doing so. There was no doubt in his mind that Will was in grave danger, and he pushed out towards him,
straining to reach him and improper bond be damned. He could feel his mate, feel his confusion and fear, and nothing would persuade him otherwise.

Will was frightened. He was ill and in danger, but even more than that, he was absolutely furious, and that gave him hope that his mate would handle things until Hannibal could arrive to support him.

“Yours is saddled, m’Lord,” Berger said, following him out of the livery onto the moonlight-flooded road. “You go ahead and I’ll be just behind you!”

Hannibal did not hesitate. He swung up into the saddle before Berger could even finish his sentence, tapping his heels and snapping his crop to urge the horse forward.

It reared, neighing at the unexpected treatment, and plunged down the road towards Hartford, carrying Hannibal through the night, the Alpha in him snarling and frothing with fury, knowing his mate was calling for him, begging him to hurry.

Time shattered and shifted. The acrid scent of the Dragon’s skin brought Will to the surface of awareness in a brief flare of panic as he was left slumped in the door of the dressing room, wincing from the snarling hiss of voices.

“Why is he here?”

“Francis, honestly—”

“You said you wanted nothing to do with him!” Francis said, his agitation striking Will’s nerves like hot coals. The flaring glow of the dragon clashed with the billowing black smoke that wore his face, wavering between reality and horror until Will could no longer tell which was the man and which the beast. “Why is Lord Reddig here? Answer me!”

“I don’t owe you answers,” Mina hissed, dabbing at her bloody cheek before the mirror, her fury matching the dragon’s own. “You came because Will needs you! Whether my father is here is of no importance!”

She changed tactics, then, turning to croon, “Will needs you, Francis. Look at how pitiful he’s become, how unhappy he is. How he suffers. Can’t you feel it? Hm? Through the bond you forged?”

Will’s mouth was pulled in a snarl as he tried to drag himself free, encumbered by the voluminous layers of Mina’s nightgown. He reached out, his fumbling fingers finding a tall vase that had occupied its place for longer that Will would ever live. In his fevered, drugged state, he had no care for it and pulled it hard to thump against the floor, hoping to draw someone’s attention, desperate to save his unborn child.

“I can feel it,” Francis whispered, his diffident voice turned husky with emotion. He slid with fluid grace across the floor to Will, naked in the moonlight, the dragon inked into his skin wrenching itself free to rise above him, a terrible, snarling nightmare full of menace.

It reached for Will, clawed hands spread, and Will snarled, baring his fangs in warning and sinking them deep when it dared to touch his face.

“We’ll have to dose him again,” Mina said, amused by Will’s attempts to protect himself and his child. “You don’t want him fighting you when it’s time to take the baby.”

The frightened, horrified cry that escaped Will loosened his blood-drenched hold on Francis’ hand and Mina smiled, creeping closer to tell him, “That’s right. I would have liked to wait longer, just to make sure it survives, but with Timothy being arrested... well, we had to move before he spills what he knows.”

She danced her fingers through Will’s hair, crooning to him, “By the time anyone comes asking questions, I will be here to tell them that nothing in the world has happened to me, though I will be in mourning for my poor, dear sister, who tragically took her life in the river rather than live as a traitor’s wife.”

“No!” Will said, the single word a throaty snarl holding the echo of his husband’s Alpha warning. It made Francis flinch, distracted from the wound on his hand and the blood that flowed down his arm. His sparkling, glowing eyes searched Will in the darkness, suspicion skating across the smooth planes of his face like a lightning strike.
“Don’t worry,” Mina said, wiping the blood from Will’s mouth, her eye swollen from the cut across her face. “If the baby cannot survive what happens, I’ll just keep your share of everything as consolation. Who knows? If Hannibal manages to come back from war, he might be glad to find a woman in his bed at last. He certainly won’t have a choice in the matter, unless he wants everyone to think he was responsible for your death, too.”

Will curled around his belly, shouting at her, cursing her, but all that would come out were unintelligible cries, harsh sobs that racked him, anger folded into fear for his child and for Hannibal, who would pay the price for Mina’s greed for the rest of his life.

Not a single maid nor footman was to be seen as Mr. Hawkes drew the locks on the front door of Hartford House. The quiet was uncanny, eerily so, broken only by the warning growls of the dogs, snarling and bristling as the party filtered inside.

“Take these animals away at once!” Lord Reddig ordered, all of them giving the great beasts wide berth.

“They do not answer to me, my Lord, only to their Masters,” Mr. Hawkes said, unperturbed by their ferocious posturing, though for all their outrage, none of the three dogs attempted to attack. “None of whom are currently available.”

“Get them out of here,” Statton said, gesturing at one of the constables, who immediately heeded a wiser suggestion when Mr. Hawkes said, “I wouldn’t approach them, were I you. It is best to let them be until his Lordship can come for them.”

Statton strutted up to Mr. Hawkes, gloating in his victory, and held his hand out.

Mr. Hawkes looked at the offered hand, then back up at Statton before fixing his gaze on the frieze bordering the ceiling.

“Keys,” Statton said, having to repeat himself over the rising outrage of the dogs.

“I regret to inform you, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, bland in his indifference, “but I seem to have misplaced them.”

“Where is the housekeeper?” Statton asked, flushing brick red. “Hm? I’ll take her set, instead.”

“I seem to have misplaced Mrs. Henderson as well,” Mr. Hawkes said, straightening his shoulders.

“Find her,” Statton ordered, sending men in search of the staff. “I expect rooms to be prepared for us, including her.”

He tipped his head towards a stately woman with wide, dark eyes and a wicker basket on her arm. She stared in the direction of the dogs, alert and unafraid, the long cane in her other hand gripped firmly but without tension.

“My son has requested I choose a midwife for him as his time draws near and his husband has abandoned him to his fate,” Statton said, sniffing with disdain. “Ms. McClane will tend to him in his misfortune.”

“I will show you to the servant’s quarters, Ms. McClane,” Mr. Hawkes said, scowling at her, but she seemed quite immune to his censure.

She looked his direction, tipping her head up at him, and smiled, saying, “I may not be able to see your face, sir, but I know you’re frowning. I’ll take good care of his Lordship. I promise.”

“I certainly expect you will, Ms. McClane,” Mr. Hawkes said, resenting her presence on principle.

“Take her upstairs,” Statton snapped, crossing his arms behind his back as he strode past the dogs, the barest of flinches betraying him. “I must speak to His Grace at once!”

“As you wish, my Lord,” Mr. Hawkes said, and turned to Ms. McClane to say, “Right this way, please.”

Zeller didn’t need anyone to tell him something else had gone wrong, and he didn’t wait for them to, either. He heard the dogs barking like mad, heard the race of footsteps on the stairs and the rush of staff through the halls, and he knew that whatever it was, he wanted no part of it.

Roland managed to turn his head a little, a bewildered frown wrinkling his aged face.
“I’ll take care of it,” Zeller said to Roland’s inquiring look, moving to lock the main entrance to the suite, throwing the bolt across the great doors and slamming it into place. He went to the windows and double-checked the locks, scowling when someone beat on the door.

“Open up! It’s Lord Reddig and I’ve come to speak with His Grace!”

“He’s sleeping,” Zeller called, raising his voice to be heard through the thick doors. He turned to the far wall and hit the catch, sliding a panel aside to reach Roland’s pistols, many of which Zeller had carried over the years on one errand or another.

“You will open this door!” Statton shouted, incensed. “My son wants an accounting of this House and all it contains, and His Grace must vacate the premises immediately!”

“He’s not going anywhere,” Zeller said, laughing aloud. He tucked a pistol into the holster at his side and closed the panel, asking Roland, “This guy has some nerve, doesn’t he?”

Roland scowled, his face dark with anger and worry.

“I am warning you!” Statton said, pounding his fist on the door. “I have constables here to ensure you obey! They will break in this door!”

“Not if they know what’s good for them,” Zeller warned him, and pulled the doors to Roland’s bedroom proper closed behind him, locking them up tight and dropping the crossbar into place. He moved to stand at the foot of Roland’s bed, eyes on the door, ready and willing to do anything and everything to keep the old man safe.


The word throbbed in Hannibal’s chest like a second heartbeat, rushing through his veins, filling him to bursting with the need to reach his mate.

His mount pounded up the paved road, sure-footed on the snowy cobbles, and as they raced through the bright light of the full moon, he could see the tracks of wheels and hooves moving ahead of them, fresh enough that they still showed through the dusting of the snowfall.

They turned onto Hartford’s drive and Hannibal’s heart skipped.

Someone had come to Hartford House in his absence, several someones by the looks of things, and he had a terrible feeling that they meant only harm to his mate and their child.

Hannibal spurred the horse up the last stretch, the poor, winded beast struggling to obey. It skittered to a halt on the slick cobbles before the door, but Hannibal was already out of the saddle, leaving the animal to be managed by the two bewildered footman who’d seen him arrive.

Two coaches stood untended, the horses still in harness, patiently waiting to be stabled. One was unmarked, but the other belonged to none other than Statton Graham.

The door stood wide from the hasty exit of the staff and Hannibal strode across the threshold and slammed it behind him, assaulted at once by Mina’s perfume, by Statton Graham’s Alpha scent, and the mixed odors of strangers who had no right to be here, not in this house, not near his mate, and certainly nowhere near his unborn child.

The Alpha in him took over, rising to swallow the gentleman and the Lord. He took one look around the empty foyer and bellowed at the top of his lungs, “Where is my mate?!”

It echoed off of the walls, bounced from the high ceilings in a roaring snarl of outrage, loud enough to be heard from the attic, where Mrs. Henderson was hiding her keys, all the way down to the cellar where the other staff had gathered in silent resistance.

“Lord Clarges!”

Mr. Hawkes rushed down the stairs with the dogs racing down around him, Winston barking like mad, the two girls silent and taut as bowstrings, tension quivering in every muscle of their heavy frames.
“My Lord! My Lord! Thank all the gods that you are here!” Mr. Hawkes called, forsaking all dignity for the expediency of informing his master what had occurred. “We have been invaded, my Lord! They are—”

“That is quite enough out of you!” Statton Graham called, stalking towards Hannibal from the direction of Roland’s suite, his angry blue eyes on the flustered butler.

“Why are you here?” Hannibal snarled, eyes skipping to the hallway as if he might catch sight of his grandfather. “Explain yourself!”

“I am here,” Statton said, a group of men converging on the foyer, drawn by Hannibal’s shout, “to do as my son has requested! I am here to have the goods of Hartford House assessed for auction and to have His Grace removed from the premises!”

“Like hell you will!” Hannibal said, his voice falling to a deep, booming growl.

“I have the necessary documentation to support my presence here!” Statton said, eyes widening, taking a precautionary step backwards when Hannibal advanced on him. “I have letters—”

“Forgeries!” Hannibal snapped, interrupting him.

“Letters from Will—”

“Don’t you dare speak his name!” Hannibal snarled, and even the dogs cowered, ears flattened with unease. He turned to look at them all, constables and inspectors and hired thugs, and shouted, “Get out of my house!”

“This is not your house!” Statton said, trying in vain to hold his ground. “This house belongs to my son! And it is his wish—”

Hannibal’s body moved before his mind realized what it was about—heir hand clenched into a tight fist and crashed into Statton’s startled, aghast face, squarely in his nose.

Lord Reddig staggered backwards and fell on his backside with a howl of pain, blood spewing down his face and dripping from his chin, both hands pressed to his nose. Hannibal seized him by the front of his jacket and slung him around, hauling him towards the door.

Mr. Hawkes moved with swift assurance to open it, back ramrod stiff and proud as Hannibal sent Statton flying out onto the snow-covered drive where he landed in a sputtering, outraged heap of affront.

Hannibal turned once more to look at those who had gathered, and put the full force of his Alpha strength behind him when he snarled, “Get out of my house!”

He did not stay to see that they obeyed him, and none of them dared to try their own luck with his temper. They scrambled through the front door as Hannibal bounded up the stairs with the dogs at his heels, shouting for his mate and terrified that he was already too late to save him.

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The third dose they forced on him was too much for even Will’s staunch determination. It sent his mind whirling off into horrors, smokehouses filled with dead girls, forests of skulls where emaciated, antlered monsters lurked behind every tree, dragons breathing flame and destruction down on all he loved while a river swelled and spit with rage, battering itself against the rearing black cliffs of his fears.

The lock on the door clicked, and for an instant light flooded the dark room, revealing the scene for what it truly was.

“My Lord, your husband has re—oh my gods!”

Jimmy cried out in horror, then fury, shouting in anger as he lunged to reach Will.

Francis drew his sinewy body up in one long, liquid line and clipped Jimmy in the jaw, sending him slumping to the ground before Will, unconscious.

Will reached out for him, moving on instinct to cushion his fall but restricted by the refusal of his body to move at his command.

And then he heard it.
He heard his husband’s voice, loud and throbbing with Alpha rage, vibrating up through the floor and down Will’s spine in a wash of relief.

“Where is my mate?”

“Hannibal!” Will shouted, but it came out a shuddering moan, a senseless formation of syllables divorced of meaning.

“Gods! He’s come back!” Mina snarled, hastily moving to lock the door. She turned to lean on it, already plotting, already planning. “Francis, tie that one up and put him in the dressing room for now.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

Mina moved to crouch next to Will and grasp his face, crooning, “Remember when we were small? How you would go down to the river gathering flowers along the way, like a little funeral arrangement just for you? I could see it in your face when you’d look back at me; you felt the tug of the current against you and you considered it, didn’t you? You thought, why not? Why not let it take you, too, let it sweep you away like those flowers, far away from any pain.”

Tears welled in Will’s eyes and flowed down his cheeks, the softness in her voice sending him to the riverside where feathered stags cavorted and flesh-hungry beasts wore men’s skins like a disguise, where the flowers flowed away from the darkness towards the light, a promise not of eternity, but of finality.

“You can go now, Will,” Mina whispered, and the soft noise of Jimmy being dragged away became the murmur of the current, the ripple of reeds. “Wade into the quiet of the river and let the water take you to a place where no one will ever hurt you again.”

“M-Mina...”

“No, I’m Will, remember?” she urged, “And you are Mina, aren’t you, darling?”

He shook his head, cursing the weakness that kept his limbs so heavy, the drug that fogged his mind and threatened his consciousness.

“Yes, you are,” she breathed, “and when we find you floating in the river, my poor, dear sister, I will be sure your funeral is a spectacle, just as you would want, darling Mina.”

Will’s eyes focused on her with difficulty, her face bleeding between the one he knew, and the one he’d never suspected lay beneath, ravenous and demanding and pitiless in its excessive need to have everything in sight, no matter the consequences.

“If you have something you wish to say,” she murmured, the floor shaking with the tread of the dragon’s feet, “you had better say it now, my dearest. Because this is the last time you’ll ever see me.”

Will smiled, his sharp Omegan fangs still flavored with the blood of Francis Dolarhyde, but it only added to the menace of his words when he whispered, “Y-you had better pray it is.”

She recoiled, expecting he might strike her, but he didn’t need to. The fear and doubt on her face convinced him that his words would haunt her as surely as his ghost would, should the dragon swallow him whole.

“Take Will to the riverside, Francis, where you took Matthew Brown,” she said, straightening and retreating to Will’s bed. “Mason is waiting there. He’ll bring the baby back to me when you’ve finished.”

The dragon loomed into his vision, choking Will with its brimstone scent, but it was the Alpha, Francis Dolarhyde, who slipped his arms around Will and lifted him, carrying him into the dressing room and vanishing into the narrow passages that ran between the walls of Hartford House.

Will struggled, fighting the foggy haze of confusion with everything in him, but nothing seemed to work right. He couldn’t fight, couldn’t cry out, couldn’t seem to keep his heavy eyes open. Even the anger that gripped him was muffled behind an impenetrable wall, distant and muted.

Time jumped and shifted, no longer the linear sense Will had always known it to be, but a turbulent, swirling master with the capriciousness of the river that had once claimed Hannibal’s family.

Hannibal.

His mate’s name rang like a bell in his confusion, solid and real and steady.
Dimly, through the hellish landscape of his fevered mind, Will felt his husband near enough to touch, a force of boiling fury and terror running towards him as fast as he could, reaching for him, fingers straining to take hold. Will reached back in desperation, making one final plea before being eaten up by darkness.

“Hurry.”

Chapter 56

Hurry.

The door to Will’s suite was locked and Hannibal hadn’t the patience to wait for Mrs. Henderson to fetch her keys for him. Under the frightened stares of the gathering Hartford staff, he reared back and slammed his foot into the door, shouting, “Will! Answer me! Will!”

He could scent him—fear and fevered sweetness, rage and determination and vulnerability that nearly broke the last restraint on Hannibal’s Alpha instincts.

“Hannibal?”

It was faint and muffled and only made him feel even more frantic when he heard it, but Hannibal answered all the same, “Will!”

The lock clicked and Hannibal flung the door open, casting about in the darkness, choking on the rancid brimstone scent of Francis Dolarhyde. Winston and Tier’s girls growled behind him, hesitating to crowd him but agitated by the scent of distress that saturated the room.

“Will!” Hannibal shouted, casting around to catch his scent, his heart hammering. “Will—”

The door slammed behind him and the lock clicked again, closing the dogs and staff out in the hall. Hannibal rounded on them, snarling in warning, his stomach sinking in a sickening drop when the shadowy figure in his husband’s room moved to turn up a lamp.

For a fleeting moment, Hannibal saw Will there before him, a split second of recognition quickly swallowed by the realization that it was Mina and not his mate who faced him. Behind the hair she’d cut to resemble Will’s tousled curls she sported an angry red gash on her face that he immediately attributed to his husband, and his heart swelled with pride that Will had fought back, just as expected. But whatever she had done to provoke Will into attacking her filled Hannibal with a deep and ugly terror of what had gone on here, considering how much Will loved his twin.

“Where is my husband?”

It came out a savage roar, throaty with an Alpha rumble beneath it, the fine hairs on his nape standing with tension.

Mina ignored the display and moved to sit placidly on Will’s bed, looking quite pleased with herself. Her uncanny resemblance to her twin vanished despite the fact that she gazed at him with Will’s blue eyes and smiled with Will’s full mouth. She lacked everything that made Will the person he was, and sat before him as a caricature of the person he loved, a surface of similarity lacking any and all heart, the sum of every loathsome fault Hannibal had once expected of her Omegan twin.

“Get out of that bed this instant!” Hannibal snapped, finding his mate’s fertile, heavy scent there beneath the fumes of Francis Dolarhyde, tainted with fever and fear and whipping him into a frenzy of protective fury. “I swear to all the gods, woman, if you have hurt him—”

“Have you gone mad?” Mina asked, her round-eyed innocence out of place on her unnaturally still face. It was chilling to hear such a close approximation of Will’s voice leaving her mouth, testament to the time and effort she’d put in to impersonating her brother. “Has only a day of absence made you forget me entirely, Hannibal? It’s me! I’m Will, your husband.”

“Mina, I am warning you,” Hannibal bit out, his words taut and sharp, “should anything happen to my husband, I cannot guarantee you will survive what you have done here!”
“And what have I done?” she asked, her smile secretive and sly. “Parted you from a spouse you abandoned for six years? Severed a bond that should never have formed? Sending Will to you was a mistake.”

Hannibal paled, her words echoing his own all those years ago when he had first laid eyes on the Omega he had rejected so cruelly. Even the memory of his husband, vulnerable and young and anxious to be accepted for who he was, was enough to snatch Hannibal’s breath away with the force of his regret, and he knew it always would. The wounds had healed, but the scars remained, and Mina saw them with the same perceptive command as her twin.

“You have treated him badly, Lord Clarges,” she remarked, smirking slightly. “Not so badly as Papa, but badly all the same. Just as I have been treated badly by Timothy. As it happens, we both have spouses we would rather not and I have the answer to that.”

Hannibal cast his senses out for Will, straining to find him, his end of their one-sided bond no longer blind and empty, but filled with Will’s instinctive call for him. His scent was unmistakable even beneath the revolting stench of Dolarhyde, and Hannibal followed it like a bloodhound to the dressing room door.

“Will dies, and I take his place,” Mina called after him, and Hannibal lost sight of everything momentarily as dark rage and trepidation welled up before him. He swung around to face her, fingers clenched on the dressing room door.

“I had hoped at first to make him frightened enough of you to wish to switch places with me,” she went on. “It was simple enough to arrange a defective saddle for him, something to scare him enough to be receptive to my suggestion. When that failed, I contrived accidents that, had they succeeded, would have pushed you into a panic that I would help you sort. Once I realized how determined you were to sire a child with him, I understood that the situation would require... finesse.”

“Finesse?” Hannibal snarled, abandoning the dressing room to advance on her. “You call pushing him down the stairs finesse? Where is he?”

“I had no choice! Mason insisted on roaming the house and Will saw him!” Mina said, waving the incident off. “It was very thoughtless of him and I scolded him for being so reckless, but he never listens to a thing. Yet the fact remains, Hannibal dear—I put Will here; here in this house, here in this marriage, here in this bed. And now I want it all back.”

She drew out the words on a small smile, her eyes dancing with malicious glee.

“You are mad!” Hannibal said, his anxiety for Will spiking so high that black spots swam at the edges of his vision, fury and outrage and terror combining to rob him of his senses. “I am going to find my mate, Mina, and you are going to be impr...”

“I wouldn’t do that, were I you,” Mina said, settling back in Will’s bed as if she owned the place, smoothing her fingers over the coverlet with possessive glee. “Think about it, Hannibal. I am offering you a chance to shed the yoke my father laid on your shoulders, hm? You could go out there and tell the staff that your husband is resting, that he doesn’t wish to be disturbed, and from tomorrow on all you need to do is call me ‘Will.’”

Hannibal’s blood ran cold, a stark shiver sliding down his spine and up to clench its icy fingers around his heart as she spoke.

“Those who suspect will be let go,” she said, her voice dropping into a whisper. “In a short time, I will be my brother. The others will adjust and accept your insistence and I can... slip into the place he left in his absence with no one the wiser.”

“Into his absence?” Hannibal asked, his voice harsh. “Into his clothing? His jewelry? His inheritance? Did you really believe that I would allow this?”

“Yes,” she said, shrugging her shoulders in a small gesture of carelessness. “You’re a pragmatic man. You have always wanted a real woman for a wife, Hannibal, and now you can have one. I have handed you a means to be rid of your mate, the child, too, should you wish it, and have a proper wife. If you keep quiet, you can go back to the Capital, back to your mistresses, back to the life you love, and I will stay here with your heir and live the life that was meant to be mine in the first place.”

“Gods, Mina,” Hannibal said, stunned to the tips of his toes. He wrenched the dressing room door open, fumbling for the light in the unfamiliar space, following Will’s strengthening scent. “This is absolute insanity!”
“You needn’t worry about the baby,” she said, nonchalant. “Will is nearly ready to pop and you’re here, now. I did have father bring a midwife for the ‘birth’, but you can say you delivered the baby. Then we wouldn’t have to convince her to play along.”

“Where is Will?” Hannibal bit out, bewildered by the abrupt way his husband’s scent suddenly cut off in the dressing room, as if Will had vanished from the spot. He landed on the switch and the globe flared to life, revealing Mr. Price bound and trussed and unconscious on the floor. “Jimmy!”


“Hannibal!” Mina said, sliding from the bed to come to him, pleading her cause as he tried to bring Jimmy Price around. “It will all be very tidy, I promise you! I made sure all of the servants heard me say how I could not bear to live as the wife of a traitor! How I wished I could die! There will be no questions, *none!* And now that Timothy will be imprisoned, no money will have to be paid to him! Hannibal!”

He rose and seized her arms in a vise-like grip, barely able to control his alarm for his husband, his breath coming in short, sharp pants and his eyes wild. The Alpha in him raged against patience, flung into a blind frenzy with one goal—find his mate, protect his mate.

“I’ll go to the courts as my brother and drop the charges against Mr. Verger so he can have his job back,” she said, her voice wavering on sudden nerves, “as per my deal. Mason will have his allowance and after Father is cleared, then we can go our separate ways. We can even try for more children, Hannibal, should something happen to the b—”

“Where is my mate?!” Hannibal roared, snarling it down into her upturned face, some bestial part of him satisfied to see her pale and shaken, frightened of him as she should be, realizing at last that she had made a grave error. In a low, dangerous whisper, he said, “I smell Francis Dolarhyde all over this room, Mina, but nowhere else. *Where did he take Will?*”

“Why pretend you care?” she asked, trying to jerk away from his grasp but unable to break his grip. “You never even wanted him! What kind of life do you have before you, Hannibal, married to a *man*?”

“He is *not a man*!” Hannibal growled, shaking her hard in his frustration. “He is neither a man, nor a woman! He is only himself, and I would rather *die* than live without him!”

“Then I suppose you shall!” Mina cried, wrenching herself free to retreat from him, those blue eyes so like Will’s, round and sparkling with dangerous ire. “He is *already dead*, Hannibal.”

Shock rocked him to his core, a momentary bolt of ravaging pain that nearly dropped him where he stood, but in the next breath he rejected it. Utterly and absolutely he rejected it.

He would know.

Bond or no bond, he would know when the light in his life went out. He would know it by the darkness that would rise all around him, hopeless and formless and endless as death itself.

“I have letters,” Mina said, thinking she had found a chink in his armor, a fingerhold to wiggle her way in. “I have letters from Will to me, to Mr. Brauner, to our father, all stating how frightened he is of you, how you threatened him, how you were responsible for cutting his saddle, how you threw him down the stairs in an attempt to kill him, how he lived in fear for his life every moment of every hour he was with you.”

Hannibal trembled, not with fright but with fury, with the fraying restraint he desperately clung to so that he would not pitch her from the house just as he had her father.

“They will fish his body from the river and I will tell *everyone I can* that *you* killed him,” she breathed, smiling with Will’s mouth, turning his beautiful, beloved face into a parody of madness—not a sickness of the mind, but a cruelty of spirit, of ambition and jealousy and petty pride allowed to fester and infect, an illness of character there was no cure for. “You see, I have been more vocal than anyone regarding your intent for Will. Every servant has heard me worry bitterly over how little you care for him. I have said time and again that you would kill him if given the opportunity, just like your first wife. I will tell every ear that will listen that you murdered him. *My* accusations will be forgiven as the grief of a loving sister, but they would stick,
Lord Clarges, and stick very well. There will be a scandal enough to kill your grandfather, scandal enough to estrange you from your family, scandal enough to ruin you at last.”

Hurry...

The call grew stronger and Hannibal seized it with a vengeance, snaring the gossamer strand of his mate’s presence and holding it tight, a tremble of relief shivering through his soul to feel him there still reaching back. Hannibal closed his eyes to mere slits and reached for Will through that connection with every ounce of his strength, with every thread of the love which wove the tapestry of the bond they’d formed together, one of affection and respect and lively curiosity, one of tenderness and teasing and quiet moments spent together, something that could neither be torn asunder nor imitated, only celebrated with every bit of themselves.

The scent of loam and snow rode beneath the hellish fumes of Francis Dolarhyde, the sound of crunching grass and leaves a whisper over the staccato rhythm of his own heart. Outside, beneath the full and pregnant moon, moving from the lawn proper to the woods, to the river.

I’m coming to you, Will...

“But you can avoid all that, Hannibal,” Mina said, mistaking his silence for consideration. “Just go out there and tell the staff that Will needs his rest, and everything will be perfect come morning. What do you think? Hm?”

“I have faced war, and starvation, and the barrel of my enemy’s weapon,” Hannibal softly said, opening his eyes to glare at her, “but never until this moment have I been so afraid of another’s intentions. Have you no love at all for the twin who loves you so deeply?”

“Of course I love him, Hannibal,” she said, her smile twisted and hard. “Love is what guided my hand when I sent instructions to cut his girth strap. Love is what formed my words when I convinced Francis he shared a bond with Will and could only honor it by putting him out of his misery. Love is certainly what made me drug him, so his death would be a painless, gentle sleep.”

She took a step closer, her gaze rapt and unflinching, snake-like in its intensity.

“I love my brother enough to save him from you, Lord Clarges,” she whispered, “as I could not save him from our father. Will you have mercy on him in my place?”

Hannibal slowly stiffened with indignation, offended to the depths of his soul. “How dare you mask your ambition in love. How dare you pretend your actions are anything other than the vindictive retaliations of a spoiled, self-indulgent child. I will have mercy on him. I will spare him the pain of your presence and ensure that he need never lay eyes on you again.”

Mina drew up, face flushing in mingled anger and offense, disbelief written in every line of her body.

“I love Will,” Hannibal said, simple words without flourish but holding the weight of the world in their meaning. “I love him more than I ever dreamed would be possible. I am not sorry to say, Lady Rathmore, that the position of my proper wife has been and will always be filled. Your selfish sacrifice will not be necessary.” He advanced on her, his amber eyes like eyes as he bit out, “Your absence, however, will certainly suffice.”

“Hannibal!” Mina said, her eyes widening and her voice rising with tension when he shouted, “Hawkes!”

The door unlocked and opened at once, revealing her to the watchful, shocked eyes of the staff. “Yes, my Lord?”

“Hannibal!” she cried, growing frantic, “You’ll never find him in time! It’s already too late for Will, but it doesn’t have to be too late for us!”

“Mr. Hawkes,” Hannibal said. “Lock Lady Rathmore in her suite. I want two sets of eyes on her at all times and I want her room searched! She’s given Will some kind of drug and I need to know what it is.”

“Gladly, my Lord!” Mr. Hawkes said, gesturing for two footmen to move within, ordering the nearest maid, “Secure Miss Speck at once and find out what she knows of this drug!”

“Mrs. Henderson,” Hannibal called as he left Will’s suite, spying the slender housekeeper trotting down the hall towards them. “There is a lock box in Lady Rathmore’s room. I want you to secure it immediately and take it to Mr. Zeller and no one else.”
“Yes, my Lord!” she called, pale and visibly shaken as she hurried to unlock Mina’s suite, but never hesitating to do as she was told.

“Jimmy Price is unconscious in the dressing room,” Hannibal said, whistling the dogs to him as he moved towards the stairs. “See that he’s put to bed and tended! Will has been taken by Francis Dolarhyde to the river.”

“My Lord! We shall send for help!” Mr. Hawkes called over the din behind him. Mina fought like a devil, snarling and shrieking as she was hauled from Will’s suite, but Hannibal had no care for her.

“Mr. Danvers, I want groups out searching the grounds! The riverbank! Rouse everyone in Hartford Town,” Hannibal said, pausing on the stairs to instruct them. “Send for the constable and tell him we need reinforcements, and someone go tell my grandfather what the devil is happening!”

With that, he raced down the stairs, back out into the cold night and the light of the full moon, clinging to that thread of his husband’s presence and forcing it wider, desperate to reach him before it was too late.

“Find Will, Winston,” he called, rounding Hartford House in search of footprints and scent, but knowing their keen noses rivaled that of the most sensitive Alpha. “Find Will!”

Winston tore off through the woods and Hannibal ran after him, Tier’s girls coursing silently at his sides, ears up and alert.

“I’m coming for you, Will,” Hannibal said, exhaling it like a prayer with every heaving breath, lungs straining for air as he fought to keep up with Winston. “Not much longer, I promise!”

And Hannibal Lecter always kept his promises.

* * *

It was like sleepwalking without feet, or maybe he truly was asleep, Will couldn’t really be sure, not anymore. He had never been awake, perhaps, just dreaming his way through a nightmare realm of darkness and tearing brush. The lullaby he’d sang for Hannibal left him in broken bits accompanied by the soft hum of the Alpha carrying him onward, away from his mate. Onward to the river of his childhood to float away, his body lost in the rotting remains of a thousand cast-off flowers he’d set in its currents as a child.

‘I’m coming for you, Will…”

He could hear his husband’s voice, soft and insistent. But Hannibal was gone, sailing off to war, called away to distant lands where any moment could be his last and Will would never know. Not now, perhaps not ever.

“He’s gone,” Will moaned, thrashing in the arms that shielded him from the snap and slash of branches. “Mina, he’s gone…”

“Yes,” the Dragon said, his voice a soft rumble in his chest, more felt than heard. “He left you to suffer.”

“Are you taking me to the river?” Will slurred, staring up at the treetops, seeing only a confused mosaic of stretching antlers and jagged crows’ wings, sharp edges and sharp talons framing the brilliant glow of the full moon.

“Yes,” Francis said in that soft, shy way of his. “I promise I will take you where no one can ever hurt you again. I won’t allow you to suffer, not anymore.”

Will could hear it over the purring rumble of the Dragon, the soft roar and rush of water that drowned out his own half-formed singing. The song echoed back to him from the burble of the water, a mournful ballad of what might have been. Heat baked off of his skin, slicking him with sweat that steamed in the frozen air. The Dragon burned him up, immune to the cold, walking naked through the snow with his heavy burden in his arms, slowly and steadily towards the river with Mina’s nightgown whipping around them both in the sharp wind.

Will could hear him breathing over his rapidly pounding heart. It seemed like Mina was there, or should have been there, or maybe used to be. He couldn’t remember anything anymore, nothing except the baby.

And Hannibal. Hannibal was coming for him. He could feel him moving through the woods, desperate and angry and afraid.

“It’s okay,” he murmured to himself, interrupting his crooning, soft song. “Not much longer, now.”
“Almost,” Francis said. “He will never hurt you again.”

Will’s heart raced so hard it made him dizzy and the world was hard to see through eyes that couldn’t focus, but he saw enough to recognize the mill ahead of him, the great wheel turning with the force of the river’s current. His little dock was not far, and his feverish and drugged mind fixed on it as Francis carried him closer and closer to the riverside.

He imagined it, how the water would be blessedly cool, that it would be soothing to topple into it and ease this terrible heat which ate at him... but the baby. The baby would die. *He* would die, and all Hannibal would find was a corpse floating in the river, just as Mina said.

“F-Francis,” Will said, struggling to gather his wits, fighting the fugue of the drug they had forced down him. “Francis, w-why are you... doing this?”

“I have to keep you safe,” Francis said, shifting Will higher against his chest, tucking his nose briefly beneath Will’s chin to scent him. “I told you we would die together, Lord Clarges. My bond to you can only end in death.”

“N-no, Francis,” Will said, trying to force strength into his voice, but it came out a broken mewl of panic. “No, you—you feel me? Through the bond? I’ve been happy here. So happy...”

He got lost in memories, finding comfort in the moments he’d spent with his husband, with the Dimmonds, with the family who loved and respected him. All of which Francis should have known, had their bond been true.

But it wasn’t. It wasn’t true, or Francis would feel through him how Hannibal was gaining on them even now, rushing through the thick woods to reach them before it was too late.

It brought Will back to the present, the river alarmingly close, bouncing and swaying at the cusp of his blurry vision like a writhing, restless snake.

‘*Take Will to the riverside, Francis, where you took Matthew Brown...’*

“M-Matthew...”

“He was a good man,” Francis said, the soft drone of his voice slightly breathless, even the Dragon exhausted by the burden of carrying a pregnant Omega. “I shouldn’t have had to kill him, but he saw Mr. Verger and your sister and he tried to come to you. He wanted to protect you, he just didn’t understand that it’s better this way, that you can’t be allowed to suffer. I wish... I wish it had gone differently. He shouldn’t have had to die.”

Hot tears rolled down Will’s face, burning trails down his cheeks, his grief for Matthew folded into his sorrow and dread, sinking beneath the surface of his bitter betrayal and the press of the danger he faced. The danger his *child* faced if he couldn’t find some way to delay Francis or escape him.

“You don’t have to do this,” he said, the words slow and thick. He tried to lift his head, but the effort was monumental and gained him nothing but exhaustion. “Francis, please... I l-love Hannibal. I haven’t s-suffered.”

“He forced you to love him,” Francis said, reeds crackling underfoot as he reached the icy riverbank. “He forced you into all of it, because of your bond. Just as you forced me into this moment, Lord Clarges.”

He began to wade into the river, tipping his head down to gaze at Will in the moonlight.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, and tears painted silver rivers down his cheeks, dripping to scald Will’s skin. “You deserve peace. You shouldn’t have to suffer. I will do this for you, and we’ll go together.”

“Hey! *Hey!* What are you—Dolarhyde! Get him out of there! What are you doing? This isn’t the plan!”

“The plan changed,” Francis snarled, his arms tensing around Will as someone approached. “*Get back!* I won’t let you hurt him! I won’t let *her* hurt him!”

“I’m not going to hurt him, Francis! We just need the *baby!*”

Something gripped Will, hard hands that snagged him and tugged him, not gentle in the least, attempting to tear him from the Dragon’s burning embrace. He tumbled to his knees, the cold water and mud seeping through the thick layers of Mina’s gown to coat his skin.
The sensation cleared his head somewhat, the freezing rush of water shocking his system into awareness, his hammering heart pumping the drug through his body. He gasped, half-dragged through the chilling mud by the grip on his arm.

“Don’t touch him!” Francis snarled again, lunging to wrest Will from man who held onto him, the same man he’d confronted in the alley at the Capital, the same man Alana and Margot lived in fear of. “You’re a liar and so is she! I won’t let you hurt him!”

Will caught his feet, thrashing to stand upright, tripping over the hem of the gown and landing on his braced hands in the mud.

“I said I need that baby!” Mason snarled, his grin hard and cruel.

Will looked back in alarm, eyes widening with confusion when blood bloomed on the Dragon’s belly.

Francis looked down at his bleeding stomach in disbelief, staring at the hilt of a knife buried in his flesh. His large, shocked eyes landed on Will and he reached out, his bloody fingers gleaming black in the moonlight.

“Can’t even follow directions!” Mason said, pulling the knife free with a sickening, wet sound of meat giving to sharp metal.

Will stifled the anguished, horrified sound that threatened to escape him and fumbled for solid ground, staggering against the weight of the wet nightgown, panting and shuddering with cold. He tripped further up the bank, falling onto the rocky, snow-glazed shore and gripping hard to heave himself up, calling out for his mate with all of his might, “Hannibal!”

A shadow fell over him, rippling across the ground in a distorted silhouette that turned the earth itself into a monstrous, hungry maw.

“M-Mason,” Will said, fingers wrapping tight around the stones he clung to, the half-frozen reeds like razors against his skin.

“Surprise!” Mason said, moving around his body, the wet leather of his boots squelching with every step. His spectacles caught the moonlight in a flare of solid white, obscuring his face into wriggling shadows. “Boy, do I owe you one! That tap you gave me in the Capital, I just—I admire your spirit, Will! You’ve got some... some courage, don’t you?”

The knife flashed in his hand, the edge honed to razor sharpness, gleaming in a spark that filled Will with dread.

“Sorry about all the deaths. You know what they say, live by the sword, die by the sword... something like that,” Mason said, and leaned down to peer at Will, his face folding in on itself until a grinning, tusked swine stared down at him, rancid and rotten. “Anyway, I thought you should know, I wouldn’t have had Francis kill them all like that if you hadn’t been sending people after us like little scurrying mice.”

He danced his fingers in front of Will’s unfocused eyes, his maniacal smile equally as at home on the man as on the pig.

“So I guess you could say it’s your fault,” he suggested, and laughed that high-pitched, frenetic laugh of his, waving the knife in his hand as he gestured. “But don’t feel bad about it. You shouldn’t die feeling bad about things. Now hold still.”

Will snarled in a fury and threw himself sideways, thrashing to escape Mason as the man lunged at him. Hands snagged the nightgown, catching hold of him and shoving Will onto his back. He reacted instinctively to protect himself and his child, using a split second opportunity to disarm his attacker—he kicked Mason hard between his braced legs, dropping the man to his knees. When he swayed forward, Will heaved his foot up with all of his might, driving his heel into that tusked monster’s dripping snout in a satisfying crunch of bone.

Mason fell to one side, catching himself on his palm, forced to drop the knife to break his fall. Blood flooded down his face, splattering over Will when he shook his head in an attempt to clear the pain, momentarily stunned. Will scrambled to reach the knife but a spasm of cold twitched his fingers into unwilling claws, robbing him of his weapon. The weapon he relied on most heavily, however, urged him to take his chance and flee. Will forced his frozen limbs to move, to push him further up the bank, screaming in panicked outrage when Mason rose up to snare him, the knife once more in his grasp.

“Well!” Mason said, pushing himself up to sway on his knees, his knife hand waving aimlessly but his fixed, manic smile unwavering, rendered even more gruesome by the blood that ran down his face. “Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice—it doesn’t matter.”
He shoved Will onto his back and pressed the knife to his stomach, the blade slipping through cloth and beneath Will's skin in a flare of white-hot pain, dragging a bloody line across his belly.

“Because you’ll be dead.”

The Dragon rose up from behind him, burning hot enough to lift the water off of his skin in a veil of steam, his wings stretching to fill the sky as he fell on Mason Verger.

Will screamed, the sound rising and carrying, a sustained, panicking, furious Omegan cry designed by Nature to bring his Alpha to his side.

zzz

Hannibal ran.

He ran as fast as he could in the wake of Will’s strengthening scent, cutting a path through brush and trees that lashed him for his insolence, unmindful of the stinging welts that rose on him as he fought his way through. He ran for Will’s life, for their life together, hoping that he would be swift enough to reach Will before Mina’s machinations and Francis Dolarhyde could take his mate from him.

Winston slowed when Hannibal called to him, leading him towards the riverside. The jolt of numbing terror through his bond sent him into a blind frenzy, forcing his legs faster, his lungs burning with effort. He heard Will’s voice, felt his call as if Will’s fingers had clenched in his gut and pulled with all of his strength, drawing Hannibal to him. The second call arrived with ragged jab of pain, shocking enough that he nearly stumbled. He broke from the treeline and saw three figures struggling on the bank in the brilliant moonlight—Mason Verger and Francis Dolarhyde looming over his bleeding mate.

His bleeding mate.

His mate whose cry shook him to his soul with the need to answer back. It ripped a thundering, piercing roar out of him, startling them all, a bellowing Alpha challenge that threatened to bring the heavens themselves crashing down.

The girls strained at his sides, sighting their prey before them, and Hannibal saw red. Without any hesitation or compunction, he snarled, “Kill!”

The dogs surged ahead, racing past Winston to reach their quarry, no braying bark to give them away, only a terrible silence promising death.

Mason struggled away from Francis’ grip in a panic, shrieking in alarm, “You were supposed to kill them!”

Will curled into a little ball in the mud, hugging his wounded belly, blood welling over his arms. He sobbed for his mate, for his child, reeling in a nightmare that had taken hold of him completely, ripping everything he loved from him in punishment at last.

He was senseless of Mason abandoning the plan, senseless of the knife that dropped into the rushes and mud, obscured by the shadow of those vast, stretching wings as the Dragon crouched over him.

Hannibal had no mind for Mason as the man sprinted for the treeline, Tier’s girls on his trail. All he saw was his mate, his Omega, bleeding and in pain and vulnerable as Francis Dolarhyde advanced on him, staggering and wounded and dangerous in his beliefs.

“Will!” He shouted, a warning without hope, the drug sickening his mate as it left his system, the cold seeping into his flesh to rob him of strength, hobbling him against escape.

“Hannibal!” Will cried, wretched and ill, reaching for his husband from instinct.

And instinct did not fail him—Hannibal’s strength flooded him, chasing back the stuporous effects of the drug even more effectively than the cold water had. The bond sang with fear for his safety, with outrage at his treatment, with pride at his courage, all stemming from the well of his love. Will heaved himself up in search of him, nose catching the earthy Alpha scent of Hannibal’s skin as it swirlled on the blowing wind, warm and crackling with anger that gave him hope.

The bond spiked with sudden terror just as the bleeding, infuriated Dragon dragged Will back into his arms, hefting him against his slick chest and staggering towards the water.

“He’s coming, Will,” he said, the words cracked with pain. “He’s coming to hurt you, but I won’t let him. I can’t come with you. You have to go on your own.”
No! Will managed, one arm pressed tight against his bleeding belly, wincing in pain as the wound pulled with every step Francis took.

Hannibal shouted again and Will strained in the Dragon's hold, looking over his shoulder to see his Alpha rushing through the tall grass towards them, stark terror and rage in his amber eyes.

And then he was flying, flung like a flower into the river's current to be pulled beneath the freezing surface.

Hannibal stared in horror as his mate was swallowed whole, plunging into the water where the current ran strong and fast to vanish without a trace.

"Will!" Hannibal shouted, Winston racing ahead of him to the water's edge. Francis loomed up before him, blocking his way, shoulders set and head lowered in challenge.

"Will!" Hannibal cried, barreling into the huge Alpha, who barely staggered at the impact. "Damn you! Get out of my way!"

Francis hit him with the force of a train, the pair of them clashing on a roar, slipping on the muddy bank and snarling.

"Will! Will!" Hannibal shouted, grunting with pain when the Alpha lunged at him and swung, falling back when Hannibal drove his balled-up fist into Dolarhyde's wounded gut. He reached for his mate with the bond, an anchor in the storm, doing anything and everything he could to bolster Will's resolve. "Don't you leave me! Will!"

"Let him go, Lord Clarges," Francis said, winded by their brief clash and bleeding afresh from the hole in his belly. He landed a punch like a thunderbolt, aching and profound enough that Hannibal's vision whited out for a moment. "You don't deserve someone like him."

"Will!" Hannibal cried, throat raw from shouting, the Alpha roar of his mate's name echoing through the moonlit night. He grappled with Dolarhyde and made another break for the water's edge, calling for his mate, only to be dragged back by the bleeding, wounded Alpha.

Realizing he would have no choice, that the quickest way he would reach Will was through the death of Francis Dolarhyde, Hannibal lowered his head and bared his heavy fangs, prepared to do whatever it would take in order to save his precious family.

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Will fought against the pull of the water, struggling for survival, impeded by the tangling length of Mina’s nightgown. It snared on something beneath the water, tugging him free of the strongest current, enough so that he could reach for purchase. He groped out blindly, his breath leaving him on a spill of bubbles that tickled over his face in the chaotic darkness, the moonlight unable to pierce very deep beneath the surface.

'Don't you leave me, Will!'

Hannibal’s fury filled him, his love and his apprehension and his need to protect giving him the strength he needed, not only to save himself and their child, but to save Hannibal, too. He reached down to free himself, wrenching and tugging until the nightgown tore free at the hem, leaving a trailing banner of white cloth still entangled on what had caught him.

Something churned the water as he fought his way up from the depths and Will’s fingers found the soft brush of warm fur above him. He pushed himself up to break the surface on a choking gasp, dragging air into his aching lungs, surprised to find Winston staunchly treading water next to him. Will gripped his wet ruff, trembling with cold and relief as the valiant little dog bore against him, helping him through the water. The echoing snarls of the two Alphas fighting reached Will's ears, a violent, terrifying clash of dragon and stag that plucked at his instinct to flee.

Hannibal, pinned on his back with Francis straddling him on the slick embankment, brought his knees up sharply, cracking the dragon in his spine hard enough to stun him. He shoved him away, scrambling in the mud to gain his feet. He saw Will's vulnerable body there in the water lit by the strong moonlight, a pale figure more ghost than human.

"Will!" he cried, hurtling down the embankment after him, his Alpha instincts rising like a tide with the desperate desire to protect him, his fragile and precious little mate.
Winston reached the shoreline and Will sprawled on all fours, trembling with spent energy, up to his elbows in water and rapidly succumbing to both the cold and his exhaustion.

“Will! Hang on, I’m coming!” Hannibal shouted, rushing to reach him, terrified by the sight of his mate so ill and weakened by the cold. “You stubborn, beautiful Omega! Just hang on, Will! I’m coming for you!”

Will lifted his head, forcing his frozen limbs to move, to pull himself towards the shore as Winston barked and urged him on. Hannibal was just there, coming towards him with desperation and aching need in his amber eyes, and something shifted through Will’s bond, something warm and surprising that brought tears to his blue eyes and a startled gasp to Hannibal’s lips.

Francis reared up behind him, a flaring red light with great, arching wings, a dangerous, devouring Dragon full of ill intent. He wrapped his muscular arm around Hannibal’s neck and pulled him backwards, wrangling his struggling form back to shore.

“Will!” Hannibal shouted, more frightened for his mate than for himself, thrashing in the Alpha’s grip, fighting to gain his freedom. He jabbed his elbow back and twisted, both of them toppling back into the mud at the edge of riverside. He drove his knee hard into the Alpha’s wounded belly and again into his groin, hoping to disable him long enough to reach his mate.

But when he turned, Francis was on him again, this time with Mason’s knife in his hand. Reacting instinctively, Hannibal snatched his wrist and swung his fist into the Alpha’s elbow, right into his joint, cracking bone and cartilage with the force of his swing. The knife fell away into the rushes, lost from sight, and Hannibal called again, “Will! Hang on! I’m coming for you!”

“Hannibal!” Will said, sensing the danger reaching a peaking point, knowing he was in mortal peril. For all the nightmares and hallucinations he’d experienced in the grip of Mina’s drugged tea, the Dragon truly terrified him. Because the Dragon was real. Francis Dolarhyde was real, and he would kill Hannibal.

“No,” Will shouted, his numb feet driving him onto the muddy bank, back towards the battling Alphas, Winston whining and afraid at his side. “I won’t let you!”

Hannibal Lecter could not die here.

Will Lecter-Graham would not allow it.

He forced himself towards them with Winston at his side, hearing the frightening chaos of two Alphas in a fight that would end only when one was dead.

A faint gleam of light in the rushes caught his eye and Will bent down, the shift in his balance and his shuddering trembles making the world spin. He found himself flat on his back in the cold mud looking at the blade of Mason’s wickedly-sharp knife.

Hannibal Lecter would not die here.

Will Lecter-Graham picked up the knife.

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Hannibal fought with everything in him, used every dirty trick his years at war had taught him to wear the larger, bulkier Alpha down. But when it came down to it, stamina did him in—Francis was younger, his attention was not split between their fight and worry for Will, and he didn’t seem to feel the terrible wounds he’d taken. Muscle peeked through the slice in his stomach, pink and glistening in the moonlight, and blood ran down him unheeded, his desire to finish his task rendering him a monster who felt nothing at all.

Hannibal, however, could feel. He felt the pain of the cuts and bruises he’d sustained and the flare of his mate through the bond they shared. He could feel Will drawing closer, the same way the world could feel the sun rising, but he could not see him. Will was wounded and in pain, cold and afraid and furious, and Hannibal was once more compelled to go to him, to find him, to keep him safe.

The Dragon took advantage of his distraction and bore him to the ground, one powerful hand closing around Hannibal’s throat with crushing, brutal force.

“He isn’t for you,” Francis said, breathless now but no more moved than he had been at the first. His voice was soft and dead, the even syllables of someone who was not frightened of killing and had no compunction doing so. “I will not let you hurt him—"
Will appeared behind him, a muddy, glassy-eyed avenging angel with a sodden dog at his side, but Hannibal didn’t need to see him to know he was there. He knew it, just as surely as he knew where his own hands were scrabbling for purchase on Dolarhyde’s naked body, as surely as he knew himself. He could feel Will’s breath and heartbeat inside of himself, a mirror of his own. They moved as if one, Hannibal pushing Francis up as Will plunged the blade down into the dragon’s back in one swift, decisive movement.

Francis snarled, scrabbling for the knife stuck in his flesh, his blood-slick fingers sliding off of the handle. He swung his hand as he turned and slapped Will, snipping his head to one side and knocking him off of his feet to slump in the mud, unmoving.

Hannibal lunged on a roar of protective fury and snatched the knife from where it was lodged in the Dragon’s back and leapt on him, the Alpha staggering beneath his weight. Hannibal drove the knife into Francis’ neck, aiming for the jugular, but his aim was knocked off-center by Dolarhyde twisting beneath the attack.

Francis screamed as the knife buried itself in the muscle of his shoulder, the piercing cry of a bellowing dragon spewing sulfur and smoke with every breath. Will pushed to his feet, senseless of the dog that whined and licked at his face with encouragement. He shook his head, the Great Red Dragon screaming as it was harried and attacked, the benign, muddy and snow-dusted shore of the riverside transformed by Will’s drugged imagination into a nightmare landscape of burning rock and dizzying fumes where a fearsome stag lowered its rack at the enraged Dragon.

‘But together? We could slay dragons together, Will...’

Hannibal circled Dolarhyde, wary and alert, feeling his mate calm and grow certain, firm in his determination. He poured his own warmth into him, his own strength, his love and his need all adding fuel to resources that Will had all but burned up. Anger nearly consumed him, unadulterated rage that this man would dare lay hands on Will, would dare deceive him, would try to harm him and their child.

He roared a challenge and flung himself at Francis Dolarhyde, hitting him hard enough to knock him off of his feet, both of them tearing great gouges into the cold earth as they fought. He bared his teeth on a furious howl and pummeled the man beneath him, the knife forgotten in his brutal fury. There was nothing left in him but the Alpha instincts that demanded he tear this creature apart, rend skin from muscle and muscle from bone, to allow his anger to consume them both until nothing was left of him, nothing at all.

Francis swung his fist as he bucked and forced Hannibal off of him, both of them bloody and bruised and wounded. He crashed forward to press Hannibal into the reeds and cold mud, his blue eyes wide and empty of anything human, entirely lost to the Dragon within.

Hannibal felt Will rise at the Alpha’s back, drawing closer with every staggering step. By the time the Dragon between them realized the hunter had become the hunted, it was already too late.

Hannibal caught a glimpse of Will’s calm face over Francis’ shoulder, his blue eyes capturing the bright moonlight in flames of deadly fury. One pale, muddied hand clenched hard in Francis’ hair and wrenched his head back, baring his throat for a split second, but it was all the time Hannibal needed.

He lunged up and sank his heavy Alpha fangs deep into the Dragon’s throat, seeking the vessels that carried his life’s blood to pierce them.

Wet heat flooded over Hannibal as Francis fought them both, trapped between an Alpha and Omega who were ready and willing to fight to their deaths for their child and one another. The brimstone scent of his skin turned acrid and sour with fear as the Dragon became the prey.

In a moment of panicked madness, Francis pulled himself free, Hannibal’s teeth tearing through his flesh in a spray of blood like onyx in the moonlight. Wrenching his body to one side, Francis jerked the knife up and buried it in Hannibal’s side.

“No!” Will snarled, struck with a flare of pain as the knife found its target and Hannibal fell back, teeth clenched as Francis struck him hard, crushing heavily to his knees.

Will moved to reach his husband, but Francis lunged to seize him. He staggered into the river where the water rushed deep and dangerous, blood pulsing down his body to leave a spattering trail, wheezing, “Together.”
Will fought him, the stinging pain where Mason had cut him mingling with the pain of the wounds Hannibal had taken. Hannibal rolled onto all fours in the mud, yanking the knife from his belly, his bloody fangs bared in a fury as he ran to save his mate.

“We'll go together,” Francis said, desperate to play out the only fate he imagined was left to him, ignoring the snarling threats of the dog who leapt and snapped at him. “I'll protect you...”

Will struggled against him, reaching for Hannibal as he was pulled into the water.

Hannibal crashed in after them, hitting Francis so hard that the Dragon staggered and lost his footing as well as his hold on Will. A split second before the river could take him, Hannibal’s powerful hands gripped Will securely, scooping him out of the water and into his arms.

Will gasped for breath, fighting the Alpha still clinging to him, a frantic, hard drive of his heel into the mess of the dragon’s throat finally freeing him as his husband hauled him clear. Hannibal staggered back, falling in the water with Will against his chest and Winston underfoot, struggling to keep his feet.

“I'll keep you safe,” Francis said, entreating, reaching for Will in confusion. “I cannot let you suffer. We will die together...”

“You will die alone,” Will said, the words broken and trembling on the chattering of his teeth, his Gift rising to find the cracks which would shatter the Dragon forever. “I don’t want you, Francis. I don’t need you! I already have the only person I need.”

He turned his face away, unable to bear the desolation that bore down on Francis, stripping him of the Dragon and leaving just a man who had been badly used by life and by Mina, twisted and shaped in a way the gods never intended. It was the blow Will inflicted on him that killed Francis Dolarhyde, far more mortal and painful than the wounds Hannibal had dealt him.

Hannibal planted his booted foot in the Alpha’s chest and shoved him into the current where his life’s blood poured out of him, lost to the relentless pull of the water as quickly as his resolve. Hannibal watched him sink, his body dragged away like a flower petal laid on its surface.

“I’ve got you, Will,” Hannibal managed, panting with effort as he hefted his mate up and out of the cold river’s clutches, amazed at how much weight a mere nightgown could add to his slender mate’s mass. He gave a mighty heave and slung Will up high into his arms, catching him beneath his knees to carry him from the water. He could feel Will’s turmoil, the sharp agony of knowing he’d used his Gift in a way that marked him forever, even if it had been to save their lives. All Hannibal could offer him was reassurance, whispering over and over, “I’m here, I’ve got you...”

Shouts sounded ahead of them, the bob of lanterns a welcome sight as Hartford staff and villagers came to aid them, wagons rattling down to the shoreline, drawn by the unmistakable sounds of two Alphas engaged in brutal battle.

“There! There, I see them!”

Winston barked, lending his voice when neither of them could manage, the cold leeching both Will and Hannibal of strength. The wound in his stomach nagged him as sharply and painfully as the cut Will bore, and Will shuddered in his arms, reaching to cover the bleeding place on Hannibal’s belly, his concern so weighty that Hannibal couldn’t separate it from his own for a moment.

Berger was in the lead, bearing a heavy blanket which he flung around Hannibal’s shoulders and tucked around Will, shouting for the others to bring the wagon.

“I’ve got you,” Hannibal said, or perhaps he just felt it, the bond humming between them in reciprocity. “I’m here, Will. I’m here.”

The contraction that wracked Will’s body nearly brought Hannibal to his knees in pain. Gasping, he quickened his step as much as was safe, rushing to the wagon with Winston on his heels. He heard men shouting in dismay as Tier’s girls raced up behind him, flecked with bits of gore that had once been Mason Verger.

“Get us to the house!” Hannibal ordered, shuddering with cold but striving to keep Will warm, cradling his mate to his chest as he was helped into the wagon bed. Will lay in his arms as if dead, his skin waxy and his lips pale, his half-lidded eyes foggy.
Drugged, Mina had said, and he could see the signs of it as the wagon bounced and jostled back towards Hartford.

“Hurry!” he shouted, reckless in his fright. “For the gods’ sake, hurry!”

Hannibal entered Hartford House at a dead sprint, bearing Will’s limp body in his arms and trailing three nervous, growling dogs. He was up the stairs and bursting into his suite before Berger could clear the door, though he shouted after that he was coming.

“Will,” Hannibal said, easing him onto the bed to strip him of his wet clothes. His heart gave a nasty jump when he saw the arcing cut across his belly, sealed with cold but red and angry, deep enough to need stitching.

Even as he looked, another contraction tightened Will’s belly, and Hannibal’s stomach sank with dismay because it was too early, too soon, and the baby wouldn’t have turned yet.

“Hannibal,” Will said, his name a whisper broken on a breath, his blue eyes fluttering.

“Sh, save your strength,” Hannibal told him, chafing his limbs and barking at Berger to build the fire up when the breathless valet arrived. He covered Will with blankets, his anxiety mounting when he saw how dilated Will’s pupils were.

“Mina said she drugged you, Will, did she say with what?”

Will tossed his head, but it was in pain, not in answer. His mouth parted as if he would speak, but he said nothing, his confusion not entirely faded from that last dose Mina had given him.

“Will, darling, stay with me,” Hannibal begged, moving to raise Will’s feet on a hastily-mounded pillow, trying to combat the shock that had overcome his little mate.

“T-the baby!” Will moaned, frightened tears rising in his wide blue eyes. “Hannibal!”

“T-the baby,” Will moaned, frightened tears rising in his wide blue eyes. “Hannibal!”

Mrs. Henderson arrived along with a bevy of maids bearing clean linens and rushing to fill the tub with hot water. Anguished, Hannibal asked, “Did you find out what she used?”

“I’m so sorry, my Lord, but she wouldn’t say, and Ms. Speck doesn’t know,” Mrs. Henderson said, gathering up the wet, muddy nightgown and handing it off.

Hannibal turned to Berger and said, “Go find out what Mina used! Beat it from her if needs be! I need to know what it was!”

“Yes, m’Lord!”

“Will! Just stay calm, I’ve got you,” Hannibal said, chafing warmth into his limbs, searching for signs that he was reviving. But he wasn’t.

“Will!” He shouted, and tried to rouse his mate, crying, “No, Will! I know you’re tired, but you must be strong!”

“What? Will, no!” Hannibal said, almost shouting it in his horror as Will’s eyes rolled back in his head, the drug and the shock converging on him until he had nothing left to give. “Will! Gods! No, please!”

The baby kicked, and Hannibal waited desperately for another contraction, dragging his watch from his pocket and realizing with dull surprise that it bore a deep scar on its cover, slicing through the etching of Hartford House in a gash that had most likely spared his life in deflecting Dolarhyde’s blade.

Another contraction cramped the muscles of Will’s belly, the wound bleeding afresh, and Hannibal paled. He rubbed Will’s stomach, searching for the contours of the baby within, sickening terror overcoming him when he felt the position.

Feet first and unready, facing expulsion from shock and trauma with little likelihood of survival unless...

“Please, Will! Don’t make me do this,” he begged, bowing over his mate’s body, covering Will in his scent, in his presence, willing his own strength into his husband and finding only emptiness. “Gods, please, no, I cannot. I will not!”
He shuddered with horror, the Alpha at war with the doctor, the boy who’d fled in the wake of what he’d done now faced with the same decision, with the same devastating result—save one life, or lose both.

“I cannot do this again,” he moaned, his tears dripping down onto Will’s smooth, cold cheek. “Please don’t make me do this again! Please, Will! Will!”

Chapter 57

“Will, no,” Hannibal wept, smoothing his still, cold face, unable to bring himself to do what he knew he must in order to save their child.

Take the baby and risk losing Will in the process.

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t.

He would save him, as he hadn’t been able to save Melinda. He would bring his mate through this, his ferocious and unpredictable Omega who had fought to sheer exhaustion and, perhaps, hadn’t the strength to fight any longer.

“You’re my husband, Will. Your battles are my battles, just as mine are yours, remember?” he whispered, his words as urgent as the kisses he pressed to his mate’s cold, stiff fingers. “And when you tire, I fight in your place, as you would in mine. I said before there is no weakness in tiring, having fought for so long. I will fight for you, Will, always and forever.”

He pressed Will’s lax fingers to his cheeks and closed his eyes, reaching for his mate through the bond, fighting down his panic to open himself wide.

“All-Mother Superior said an Alpha-Omega bond is every bit as important to the bonded pair as one’s lungs, or heart, or mind,” he breathed, their words inspiring him with hope. He sought Will with the strength of his love, casting it like a lifeline with faith his mate would take hold. “You have been my voice of reason, my conscience, my heart and my soul, now let me be your strength, Will. I will give you everything I am, to my very last breath. All you have to do is accept it.”

Something stirred in the bond, a faint curl of awareness, of response. Hannibal’s eyes flew wide and he focused on its tiny tickle, forcing himself to calm. Will’s pulse slowed in time with Hannibal’s, his shallow breathing evening out, the tension in his taut body easing.

“That’s right,” Hannibal said, gasping the words on relieved tears. He leaned up over Will to press a kiss to his forehead, trembling as a light flush tinged Will’s pale skin with warmth. “That’s right, my love. I’m here with you, always and forever, Will.”

“My Lord?” Mrs. Henderson said, lingering just behind him. “Please, my Lord. Is there anything we can do?”

“Fetch the midwife, Mrs. Henderson,” Hannibal said, straightening to the task at hand, straining for the touch of his mate through their bond even as he shifted him on the bed. “We have a baby to deliver.”

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Somehow, the chaotic darkness of his drugged and shocked mind brought Will to stand once more atop the cliff of his nightmares. The black sky draped above him streaked with lightning that crackled and stank of ozone, gusting with the Dragon’s sulfurous breath.

My conscience, my heart, my soul...

The soft, urgent voice came from nowhere and everywhere, elusive as Will searched for it, gasping when a deep, piercing ache clutched his belly.

Let me be your strength...

It came from the summit, drifting through the snarl of the raging storm to snare him. Will took a shaking step, but pain divorced him from control of his body, cutting across his belly in an arc of agony. He looked down, blood flowing down his bare legs in a wash of heat. The cut Mason had given dealt him skated wider, gaping to bare the emptiness within.

I’m here with you, always and forever, Will...
He stumbled towards the edge of the bluff in a panic of horror, feet slipping in a mess of his own blood, the pain sinking its teeth deep. A figure stood with arms wide and waiting, perched atop the crumbling edge over the roaring, angry water, just like in his nightmares.

*Will! Stay with me! Stay with me...*

A presence rose behind him, watchful and waiting, great wings stretched to blot out the world itself. Will staggered beneath the weight of its regard, desperate to reach the summit, desperate for any relief from this awful, tearing pain. The figure waited, patient and motionless, an unwilling spectator to his pain.

‘*Useless things are only fit for burning...*’ The memory of his father’s voice uncoiled from the depths of the storm, brushing his heart like fingers in search of cracks. ‘*This is how it always would have ended, William. Put this mistake to rights. Mend the hole you’ve torn in the heart of your world.*’

The pain washed over him, wrenching and awful and dragging him to his knees. The presence loomed over him, bending low to curl its shadowy fingers around his body.

‘*It is a kindness, William. It is a kindness to yourself as well as to your husband. If you truly do love him, then do not hesitate now...*’

Something cried out, sharp and short. The wail of a child, the scream of Will’s soul as he fought to escape his suffering.

*I’m here, Will! I’m right here with you, my love...*

Will grit his teeth and surged to his feet, bearing up beneath the weight of his father’s regard, beneath the oppressive resentments his heart had harbored all the long years of his life.

He reached out for the figure on the clifftop and his father laughed, whispering, ‘*Go ahead, William. See what it gets you. Do you know why he stands there at the summit? It’s the best place to watch you fall...*’

The nightmare that had plagued him stood before him now, the figure waiting, the cliff with its crumbling face prepared to drop him, the awful and final betrayal when he would reach out and be left to fall into nothingness.

But Hannibal would never let him fall.

Hannibal would fight to save him. Be it against dragons or darkness or nightmares, he would always keep his promises. His love gave Will hope he could trust in, hope he could have faith in, hope that he was not alone with his demons, not anymore.

Not ever again.

Will drew on his strength and drove himself forward, resisting the mockery of his own doubts, the dark and secret anger which still hoped to trap him in his own desolation. Arms outstretched, he threw himself forward with faith he would be caught, and the surety of Hannibal’s promise rose up around him. It cradled Will in warmth, chasing away the hurt and exhaustion that plagued him. It bore him safely away from the ragged cliffs of his fears and the monsters which lurked there to settle him in the silence of the river below.

*You are my husband and I will protect you...*

He drifted in the river of his childhood, no horror able to reach him through the blanket of his husband’s presence. The shadow of his father rippled beneath the black surface of the water, smiling at Will as the current snared him, pulling him deeper into the darkness. The pain eased, peeling away from him the further he allowed the river to take him, pulled from his life by the eddying current into the unknown at last.

*No...*
The refusal bloomed in his chest, the warmth around him penetrating deep to wrap like fingers around his heart, fixing him in place.

*I refuse to live without you! It cannot be borne, Will! Do you understand me?*

The words beat like a second heart, teasing his memory. There was something important he had to remember, something which this thick and endless darkness tried to hide from him.

*It is always yours to choose, Will... I'm begging you—choose me...*

The stifling absence of light was pierced by a tiny ember, its glow intruding on his calm. Will watched it pulse like a heartbeat, a minuscule firefly signaling for an answer.

He moved against the current, drawn by the light. The river spilled around him in a wash of his regrets, showing him the moments of his life from his first breath to his last.

His last.

Peace overcame him, tranquil understanding that—brief as it had been—he had come to the end of his own story, the final chapters all the sweeter for their bitter start. He looked back into the yawning darkness, the contours of mystery darker shapes on velvety night, and he stirred towards it.

*Will Lecter-Graham, don't you dare take another step!*

*‘Hannibal!’*

His mate’s name echoed inside of his head, inside of his heart and soul, pulling him away from the call of the river with strengthening resolve. The light before him flared, reaching for him, beckoning him closer.

Will’s heart thundered in the muffling silence. The current tugged at him as if in fear of the light, urging him to turn away, to give himself over to its embrace and close the book on his life without looking back. It offered him release from the shackles of his life, the freedom to flow wherever the river might take him and find out at last what lay in wait.

He looked at the light, so distant, so far, and he was so very, very tired...

*‘Will! Stay with me! I have no home at Hartford House if you are not here with me! I need you! We need you! Come back to me...’*

*‘I haven’t the strength,’* he knew. It drained from him into the water, sapping his determination.

*I will be your strength...*

Love and understanding flowed into him, a line like a tether drawing him to safety, pulling him from the promises of death. It gave him the strength to push against the current, to wade towards the light and the happiness he knew awaited him there.

*‘Hannibal,’* he whispered, reaching for him, abandoning regrets and resentments to the past, where they belonged. It took an eternity to reach it, but the light grew stronger around him, falling on his skin with the warmth of the golden, glowing sun, like the gleam in his husband’s eyes when he smiled.

*‘...tell you a story about a fool, and an Omega, and a Great Red Dragon...’*

Will drifted in the light, following the soft murmur of his husband’s voice as he told the story of their lives, every syllable infused with affection. It lured him closer, drawn by the power it held, compelled by the sure embrace of Hannibal’s love surrounding him.

*‘...and then I made a very serious mistake...’*

Will pushed towards his voice through the beckoning light, plunging into the future it promised with hope even the gods themselves would fear to challenge.
“Hannibal,” he breathed, spreading his arms wide, swallowed in comfort and finding the joyous welcome he’d once thought beyond his reach—the fullness of a bond completed, forged in the fire of a Dragon’s maw and honed in shared peril.

“... I dared to question him, and do you know what he did?”

The golden light took on the familiar shapes and contours of the ceiling over Hannibal’s bed, his blurry vision slowly sorting it to make sense. He was warm from the tips of his curls to the curl of his toes, blissfully content and boneless with relief. He floated in the encompassing presence of his mate—the earthy musk of his skin carrying new notes to tease his nose, the heat of him seeping into Will’s flesh to warm him from the inside out. Hannibal’s body pressed so tightly against Will’s there was no room between them, just as it should be. His head was pillowed on Hannibal’s hard shoulder, but no discomfort could find its way through to bother him, not now that he’d been drawn from the lure of the river.

“He raised his arm,” Hannibal said, the deep, Alpha purr of his voice a throaty rumble of vibration as he spoke, “and he slapped me in the face with his trout, just as I deserved.”

Will smiled, turning his head towards Hannibal’s voice, his bleary eyes focusing sharply on his husband and what lay cradled against his chest in the warm curve of his arm, adding those layers of scent to his husband’s Alpha perfume.

For a heartbeat he thought he was seeing double, but he realized that two tiny babies lay sleeping in the easy curve of their father's arm. Will uttered a soft, delighted cry, his heart bursting with love, granting him renewed strength to move.

Hannibal’s arm shifted against his back to help him turn, tipping Will more fully against his chest so he could nuzzle their newborn babies, pressing his lips to the soft skin of their cheeks and shoulders.

Will wept, drawing their sweet baby scents into his lungs and soul, alike but distinct; Alpha and Omega, one wiggling furiously at the indignity of it, the other cooing and content.

“They are the most perfect and beautiful babies I have ever laid eyes on,” Hannibal whispered, stroking Will’s curls and shoulders with his free hand, a low, unceasing purr rising in his chest as he held his mate and children. For all the tears he’d cried this long night, these were ones of joy at last, the tenderness of his love for his family drawing them from him without reserve.

“Two,” Will said, his throat raspy and raw but his smile brilliant. He worked a trembling hand from beneath the layers of blankets and delved into the covers to touch their fingers and toes, counting and kissing each one. “Two!”

“I did try to tell you,” Hannibal said, shifting to sit up straight against the pillows, settling the sleeping babies in the nest of his lap where his mate could better reach them. “I’ve never known you to do anything by halves, Will.”

Will stared at them, enraptured by their features, so like Hannibal’s in every way.

“They have your mouth,” he said, tracing one pouty lower lip, then the other, a delighted laugh escaping him when the little Alpha male stretched and tried to latch onto his finger with a grunt. “And your demeanor. My hair, however; gracious! Look at how much of it there is!”

He tried to sit up but a dull warning of pain paused him, a flaring ache where the wound of his nightmare had sliced him in two.

“I’m sorry, Will, I had to stitch you,” Hannibal said, feeling Will’s pain as his own. He slid his hand from Will’s nape to grasp his arm, helping him to sit up. “You’re going to be sore for quite some time, I fear. You might be a bit woozy, too. I had to give you laudanum to counter the drug in your system and ease your pain.”

Will eased upright, a small part of his joy stolen by the realization of what had happened.

Hannibal had been forced to take the babies, just as he had all those years ago with Melinda...
Hannibal immediately shook his head, drawing Will to him to kiss the faint tremble from his lips, purring, "No, darling, I didn’t have to do anything so terrible as that. It was the cut Mason gave you. It was quite deep and worrisome to begin with and your labor only worsened it; I wanted to take no chances with infection."

"Then the babies?" Will asked, clutching Hannibal’s shoulder for support as he settled, leaning over to look his fill at them, their perfect and beautiful little darlings. Just the sight of them chased his pain away, both the tug on his stomach and lower still.

"You were... astonishing, Will," Hannibal said, and softly shook his head, sighing, "Despite everything, being filled with a drug that could have killed you, being nearly frozen to death in the river and dosed with laudanum, you still managed your labor without any hesitation."

"You delivered them," Will said, a slight smile finding its way to his lips as his spirits rose, the darkness of the past evening lifting from his heart.

"We delivered them," Hannibal said, tucking Will against his side to rest his arm around his back, hand cupping the slight curve of his hip. "Ms. McClane, and I thank all the gods and stars for this, has attended a great number of early births. Between us all, we were able to get the babies delivered safely."

"A midwife? Did you send for her?" Will asked, entranced by his infants, unable to keep from stroking their round little cheeks.

"No, your father brought her," Hannibal said, the low, disapproving Alpha rumble in his voice causing his infant son to hiccup with surprise, his face flushing and screwing up on a short, sharp yowl.

Will rubbed his little chin and throat, cooing to soothe him, and the baby settled with a gurgling grunt. In a gentle whisper, Will said, "I’m assuming he meant to pretend she delivered them herself?"

"So it would seem, though she had no idea of any of it," Hannibal said, kissing Will’s temple. "All she was told was there was an emergency and she was needed immediately."

"Not exactly a lie," Will said, smoothing the blanket over his babies, running his fingers over them, committing this moment to his senses and memory.

Hannibal rubbed their round little cheeks, the scratches and bruises on his hands penetrating Will’s awareness. He looked up at Hannibal’s smiling face, at his euphoric expression shadowed by bruises and gashes.

"You should have seen me before I bathed," Hannibal murmured, amusement filling the bond. Will smiled, reassured his husband had not been badly wounded. "I looked a perfect fright."

"I must not have looked much better," Will remarked, cautiously placing a kiss to a particularly colorful bruise on Hannibal’s cheek.

"No, you looked... gods, I don’t even wish to recall it," Hannibal said, the tight, strained words accompanying a pang of physical hurt through the bond, his distress for Will so great it manifested a sharp ache. Hannibal turned his head just a fraction, tender and raw and tremulous. His words escaped on a whisper, half broken on tears, "I will never be more frightened in my life than I was this night. Nearly losing to you to river, to Mason, to Dolarhyde."

Will’s heart broke on the ache of Hannibal’s pain, on the fear and panic still coiling through their bond, drawing strength from his words as much as his memories of the riverside.

"I was so frightened," Hannibal said again, his golden gaze searching Will’s beloved face. "Even once I brought you home, there were so many times, Will. So many times I could feel you slipping away from me, breath by breath—"
“You called me back,” Will whispered. “When I wanted nothing more than to let go, when the pain was so crippling I couldn’t bear it, it was your strength I drew on, Hannibal. It was your voice that parted the darkness and called me back.”

Hannibal’s glittering amber eyes held his, shadowed with pain and the knowledge of how close he’d come to losing Will for good.

“For a moment, I wasn’t sure you would heed me,” he whispered, a blink spilling tears down his high cheeks. He shuddered, vividly struck by that awful moment when he’d physically felt Will move towards death rather than away from it.

“When you pulled away from me—”

“You stopped me, Hannibal,” Will said, aching when his husband cut off in pain, the desolation in his bond almost too much to bear. “You said, ‘don’t you dare take another step!”

“Did I?” Hannibal asked, baring his heavy Alpha fangs in a slight smile. “I frightened the staff half to death shouting at you, saying everything I could to reach you. I hoped at least if I gave you orders, you’d be cross enough to come back, if only to cosh me.”

“I am never cross,” Will reminded him, drawing Hannibal's fear through their bond and pushing it away, leaving it filled only with the wonder Will felt. “But I must admit it got my attention.”

Hannibal’s smile widened, still stiff around the edges, still shadowed with the losses they had come so close to taking this long, terrible night. His amber eyes brightened, however, when he admitted, “I could feel you through the bond, Will, slowly but surely making your way back. I was so terrified you wouldn’t.”

“It was difficult, but I had help. You fought for me, Hannibal,” Will said, thinking of the Dragon, of that presence atop the cliff, of the river’s gentle insistence. “In more ways than one, you fought for me.”

“We fought together,” Hannibal said, pride and love and joy shining in his amber eyes. “For our lives and our children and one another. We have saved one another in so many ways, Will, and we always will.”

“Always and forever,” Will promised, the strength of their shared bond moving them past words and into the quiet depths of perfect understanding.

The little Alpha made a soft, cranky sound, the intensity of their regard disturbing his rest. Both of them chuckled at his look of frank disapproval, so like Hannibal’s in every respect. It focused Will sharply on the present, dragging the last corner of his mind from what he’d seen in the depths of the darkness. It could wait, he knew. For many years, for decades, for as long as he could make it, it would wait.

“Gods, they’re so small...” he breathed, distracting himself with their perfection, moved to marvel at them all over again.

“They’ll grow quickly, never worry on that count,” Hannibal assured him, cupping the little Omega’s fuzzy-haired head. He searched the bond, looking for any part of Will that might have lingered behind, any crack in the teacup which might allow him to slip away, but he found nothing.

He was whole.

They both were.

“Do you feel up to holding them?” he asked, his voice husky with love, with relief, with gratitude that Will had chosen him even through the worst of things.

Will nodded, his breath leaving him on a soft, delighted laugh. Hannibal shifted in the bed and mounded the pillows behind him, helping Will sit up with their support. The movement made him wince as his tender, abused parts protested, but his discomfort vanished the moment his children were laid in his arms against his chest.
His heart skipped and stuttered, finding a new rhythm as he held the babies they had waited for, for so long. Tears rose unbidden and unheeded, a smile curving his mouth without his awareness. He trembled, cradling them against his heart. They both fussed briefly but settled, soothed by his heartbeat, safe in the arms of their parent in ways Will had never experienced even in his own infancy.

“You’re so tiny,” he purred, rocking them gently, kissing the wild thatch of their dark brown curls. “Oh, my gods, Hannibal…”

Hannibal met his gaze, both of them tearful and joyous, their bond filled to bursting and coursing between them with a life of its own.

Hannibal pressed close to his side in an embrace, one arm around his mate, his other hand lifting to touch their children. He tickled one little rosebud mouth with his fingertip, both he and Will laughing softly when the baby turned and pursed their lips, mouth working. One hand flailed, tiny perfect fingers with tiny perfect nails. Hannibal curled his own finger beneath, wondering that anything could be so very small, each baby a new miracle that begged disbelief for how perfectly Nature could arrange things. He leaned down and kissed those minute fingers, smitten to his soul.

“Well,” he whispered, grinning, “It looks as if it’s official. Grandfather has the heir he demanded and you are stuck with me, Will Lecter-Graham.”

Will laughed, cutting his blue eyes to Hannibal’s in amusement. “Stuck? I thought the future was always mine to choose?”

“It is, but the gods know I cannot be without you,” Hannibal reminded him, and Will smiled. “If it takes the next seventy years, I will daily convince you to choose me.”

“Should I be on guard against another wardrobe?” Will asked, brows rising in amusement. “Or do you intend to persuade me with your masculine charms?”

“Don’t think I won’t. I’d do anything in my power to influence your decision in my favor,” Hannibal warned, his grin echoing Will’s own.

“Heavens, so long as you keep your shirt on, I’ll keep my wits about me,” Will reminded him, blue eyes dancing with delight.

“It’s quite unfortunate for you that you weaken at the sight of me, but there’s no sense arguing any of it. We share a bond,” Hannibal went on, his mournful tone belied by the amusement in their bond. “Try as you might, you can’t wriggle out of this marriage now. You’ll just have to make do and deal with my infatuation as best you can.”

“What a terrible fate,” Will murmured, tipping his head for a soft kiss and rewarded with a gentle press of warm lips against his own.

“It will be tiresome for you, I know,” Hannibal said, his voice thickening with emotion as his playful teasing gave way. “I will likely drive you mad with wanting to be rid of my moral decrepitude, but you simply cannot be gone from me. I won’t have it. I’m your Alpha and you’re my Omega and you’ll have to learn to shove along. Perhaps you could distract me with more children?”

Will’s head fell back on a hearty, surprised laugh. Incredulous, he asked, “More? We’ve just had two!”

“Yes, I think more children would do quite nicely,” Hannibal said, tickling his fingers beneath the tiny Omega’s jaw, beyond delighted when they chirped and wiggled against his touch. “At least a dozen more should do the trick, and if every single one of them is an Omega then so be it.”

“Oh really?” Will asked, nuzzling his husband to kiss the high, stark sharpness of his cheek.
“Well, I am hopelessly enamored of them by now, what with two of them in my life I love so dearly,” Hannibal purred. “Luckily for us both,” Will purred, “I will always choose you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal grinned and found Will’s mouth with his own for another coaxing, sweet kiss. The reciprocity of their bond swam between them, only heightening the strength of what they felt for one another.

A soft knock parted them as Berger poked his head in, and Hannibal muttered, “Didn’t I say I would fire them?” “Hush,” Will whispered, asking, “Yes, Mr. Berger?” “Ah! Beg pardon, m’Lord, just checking to see if you was awake?” Berger stammered, blushing to have interrupted them, “Ms. McClane is asking after you.” “I am, Mr. Berger, thank you, and—Jimmy!” Will gasped, the events of the night returning in a rush with force enough the Omega in his arms began to cry in response.

“He’s got one hell of a bruise, but he’s awake, my Lord, and chomping at the bit to see the babies,” Berger said, drawing closer as Will soothed his startled children. Berger looked nearly as proud of himself as Hannibal did and quit the room with a soft, dazed smile.

Thoughts of Jimmy turned Will’s mind back to what had happened, the horror of it still veiled behind a haze of drugs and hallucinations. He shivered and Hannibal caressed him, soothing away his shudder with a throaty, deep purr. “I don’t wish to think of it,” Will admitted, reluctant to revisit any part of it. “Then don’t,” Hannibal urged him, kissing Will’s soft cheek, fingers smoothing over the round bellies of their babies. “We can worry later, Will.” “Can we?” Will asked, his heart clenching on the question. “Mina must surely have fled by now! And my father will be rallying support. I haven’t the time to—” “We’ll make time,” Hannibal said, and Will subsided, the calm in their bond easing his worry, allowing him to focus on what was truly important—his children, his husband, and the happiness their little family felt. “We shall have to deal with my father,” Will said, knowing that a great deal of happiness depended on safety, and none of them was safe with his blood relatives on the loose. “And my sister.” “Your sister is confined to her suite,” Hannibal murmured, kissing the snub of his nose.

A bolt of panic sliced through the bond as Will cried, “The passages! Hannibal, she’ll escape—” “No, she’ll do nothing of the sort,” Hannibal said, shaking his head. “I have two sets of eyes on her at all times and I am determined to have those passages blocked up. Zeller read of them in Mina’s letters and Grandfather confirmed their existence. Nothing like this will ever happen again if I can help it. I shudder to think how Mason Verger was sneaking into our rooms in the night and stealing correspondence!” “I was the one who told her of them,“ Will whispered, stricken. He cuddled his children close, comforting himself with their nearness.

The guilt bubbling up through their bond brought a low, rough chuff from Hannibal’s throat and he gave his mate a squeeze, telling him, “You had no indication she would ever do something so terrible, Will. And she had quite a lot of help, unfortunately.” “Mason,” Will said, the name conjuring a tusked swine, grinning and violent as it cut into his belly. He twitched and the Omega in his arms uttered a soft cry, attuned to their mother’s distress. “Sh, hush, darling. I’m here, my sweet. I’m here...” “Mason won’t be helping anyone do anything now,” Hannibal said, watching his mate soothe their child. “By all reports, the girls did a very thorough job on him.”
“And... and Francis?” Will asked, focusing on his children to distract himself from his growing guilt.

“The river took him,” Hannibal said, the soft rumble of his voice easing Will’s tension. “The wounds he suffered would have killed him, Will.”

“I killed him,” Will whispered, blinking hard against the thought of it. “What I said—”

“No, darling, if anyone killed him, it was me,” Hannibal said, his mouth still bitter with the coppery taste of Dolarhyde’s blood. “He was dying when he went into the water, Will. It was blood loss, not words, that killed Francis Dolarhyde. And I would gladly tear his throat out a thousand more times for what he did to you.”

Will shuddered, his guilt and the terror of his ordeal dissipating beneath the calm of their bond. The soft press of his mate’s nose beneath his jaw soothed him, Hannibal’s lips finding and kissing the mark on his neck with gentle care.

“I suppose, if we’re determined to deal with things properly, we shall have to take the babies to the nursery,” Hannibal whispered, “and remand them to the care of Mrs. Henderson for the time being until proper help can be found.”

The babies wriggled and stretched, yawning and snuggling against one another in the warm nest of blankets and their parents’ arms. There was no darkness to overshadow the brightness of their lives, no whisper to fracture the happiness they filled Will with. Holding them, feeling them in his arms, seeing the minute flicker of their expressions, Will found he could no more dwell on the past night than he could put them away from him. Hope had come to life in his arms and he was determined to enjoy it in its fullness.

“Soon,” he whispered, tipping his head to kiss them, to delve into their sweet baby scents and drown himself in love, “but not yet, Hannibal. First, we need to name these little darlings.”

“Nonsense, we’ll name them Hannibal,” his husband said, thrilled to abandon any talk of the horrors they faced and eager to share his husband’s joy.

“We’re not naming all of our children after you,” Will told him, chuckling.

“Well, at least one,” Hannibal said, feigning offense.

“I think one Hannibal Lecter in the world is quite enough. Besides, if anyone should have a child named after them, it should be the person who did the carrying!” Will said, gazing down at his children with rapt devotion. “What do you think of naming our Omega after your mother? We could always call them Saul, if they prefer male address.”


“No, just Saule,” Will said, shaking his head, unable to keep from smiling when his husband was so set on amusing him. “Though I do still prefer Lucas for our son. It’s Grandfather’s middle name, and he would dearly love to have his great-grandchild named for him.”

“Hannibal Lucas Lecter,” Hannibal said, rubbing the baby’s belly with one large, warm palm. “You would like that, darling, wouldn’t you? Hm? Being named for your papa, as well? Is that what we should call you?”

“Hannibal,” Will said with an exasperated laugh.

“Well, if you insist,” Hannibal said, lifting his darling little baby into his arms to cradle him, saying, “Hannibal it is.”

It took time for Mr. Danvers and the investigators to gather all the facts, time in which Will rested, curled up in the nest of Hannibal’s bed with their children in his arms and healing from his ordeal. He gave his accounting of what had happened, every detail that his cloudy but remarkable memory could manage, and the investigation sorted itself from there.

There was very little left of Mason Verger to be collected from the treeline where he’d fled, but enough to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt he would not trouble anyone any longer. Of Francis Dolarhyde, however, there was no trace.
Hannibal had little doubt he was dead, badly wounded as he’d been and broken in spirit, but he knew he would not rest easy until there was a body to confirm it.

It was Matthew Brown’s body that was recovered instead, discovered by those who volunteered to drag the river for Francis. There was no clue left as to how he had died, Nature and the inevitability of time had rendered him unrecognizable, but the leather apron still wrapped around his body was undeniably that of Matthew Brown.

And entwined around the bony remnants of his outstretched hand was the trailing white hem of Mina’s nightgown, still tangled from where Will had torn it free to fight his way out of the river.

Will wept when he was told, the kind of wracking, shaking sobs that had been held back too long, the pain of that endless, nightmarish night purged from him on a surge of grief for a friend who had, even in death, helped to save him.

Found, too, were the bodies of the guards who had gone missing that fateful night, piled like cordwood atop one another in the woods, throats cut just like Randall Tier’s, just like those officers from Marsham Heath. Francis again, on the orders of Mina, clearing the way for his trek to the river with Will.

When it came time to deal with his sister, Will made the arrangements personally, grim and firm and determined. Too many people had been hurt, killed, all for the sake of her selfishness. The least he could do to honor their memory was see Mina held accountable for it.

It was a very cold, very bright day when Will finally descended from his little nest with Winston and Tier’s girls at his heels. Snow lay thick beyond the windows, blanketing the world in muffling quiet. Inside, the sound of hammering echoed faintly through the walls, discordant and distracting, but a necessary evil.

“Good morning, my Lord.”

“Good morning,” Will murmured to the guard at the door, composing himself as he approached the small, hastily-converted storeroom where Mina had been moved. He paused there, wishing he’d gone with Hannibal and the children to see Grandfather, or had lingered overlong in the bath under Jimmy’s watchful eye.

But he couldn’t, he knew. Confirmation had come last night that they had arrived in Hartford Town and today was the day.

They were coming to collect her, and Will needed to say his goodbyes.

“Open the door, please,” Will said, expecting to be nervous, but finding he was calm. Dangerously calm.

There was a soft clink and click as the heavy lock was turned, and the guard opened the door for him.

She stood at the window, dressed as if for mourning with her hair carefully tended. She did not turn around when Will entered, the dogs crowding in with him on high alert. She looked so fragile and alone Will was forced to draw a deep breath, struggling to sever the ties his Gift had made to her, the understanding that had nearly allowed a tragedy to play out beneath this very roof.

“Good morning, Mina,” he said, waiting to see how she would respond.

She said nothing. A guard crossed in front of the window, their shadow falling like a veil over her face, brief and fleeting. Will quietly turned the single chair around and pulled it closer to the door before sitting, still cautious in his movements.

“I see you’re managing on your own,” he said.
“I realize you’re very cross with me, Will, but I would greatly appreciate it if you’d allow Gretchen to attend me,” Mina said, her tone airy and light. “It’s been almost impossible to do up my gowns.”

“Miss Speck was arrested and taken to the Capital, Mina,” Will informed her. “She’s being held as one of your co-conspirators and was as eager to unburden herself as Timothy.”

The sound of hammering resumed quite near, loud and unpleasant but not disruptive enough to prevent a reply. Mina chose not to respond to that, however. Her shoulders tightened in a slight tell of anger or frustration, but not fear. He knew she had quite enough sense to be fearful, but she wasn’t.

Not yet.

“I’m sorry for all the noise,” Will said, deciding it was as benign a subject as any he could start with. “We’ve decided to board up the passages that run through the house, considering how lethal they’ve proven to be.”

Mina turned from the window with a smirk, watching him from beneath the heavy curve of her lids with secretive assessment, as if bemused by how he had gotten the better of her.

“Hannibal did an excellent job stitching your face,” Will said, keeping his voice soft and low. “You shouldn’t carry too much of a scar.”

“No thanks to you,” Mina said, tilting her chin up in a familiar gesture of stubborn irritation.

“I will have scars of my own, Mina,” Will said, meeting her furious blue eyes with his calm, bland gaze. “Scars you may not have put there yourself, but are responsible for all the same.”

She flushed. She had that much good grace, in the end, or perhaps it was just wishful thinking on his part.

There was so much about her that he simply could not recognize. So much that had been hidden from him, some of it willfully so on his part, and the blame solely his own.

“Mason didn’t survive,” he said, and Mina flinched, looking away towards the window but searching far beyond the confines of the glass. “I thought you might like to know what became of him.”

“I expected he wouldn’t,” she said, her voice softening. “Not with those dreadful monsters loose. Did he scream?”

“I imagine so,” Will said, watching her and wondering where his sister had gone, the girl who had embraced him and shared a crib with him and played with him as children. The woman before him was an absolute stranger, a sum of unknowns without mercy or pity, chilling in her capacity for evil. “It was a very gruesome end for anyone, but I cannot say I’m sorry. He cost a good many people their lives... but I know you will mourn him in your own way.”

“Yes,” Mina said, taking a shaky breath. “We were alike, he and I, in so many ways. I suppose you know we were lovers.”

“I do,” Will said, his mouth pursed in disapproval. He fiddled with the chain on his pocket watch, uncomfortable and dismayed. “Hannibal had the lock box opened, Mina. We found the Addendum copy, the letter you stole from me. All of the letters.”

“Did you, now?” she asked, sighing the words as if bored, as if nothing of this situation touched her.

“Yes. It was very clever of you to steal your correspondence back from Timothy and from Father before anyone else could find it,” Will remarked, frowning. “You never imagined your plan would fail, did you? That the lock box would ever be opened? Is that why you kept such damning evidence? Or did you simply lack the time to destroy it all?”
“Do you truly have to ask me that?”

“You should confide in me, Mina,” Will told her, eyes narrowing with irritation. “You should at least attempt to rationalize what you have done! Explain it to me, Mina, please!”

“I don’t owe you any explanations,” she said, plucking at her skirt and leaning heavily against the cold wall to stare at the frost on the window.

Will stiffened with anger and flatly said, “The letters and documents speak for themselves. We know everything.”

“Everything,” she said, snorting on a scoffing laugh. “Now that I highly doubt. No one ever knows everything, Will.”

“True,” Will admitted, frustrated with her. “We know enough. Father has been arrested for the part he played. The local Magistrate took him into custody just yesterday.”

“Will there be a trial?” she asked. Will was very aware of the cunning that flitted across her face, how her mind searched and searched for a means by which to turn the situation in her favor.

“No. His Grace wants it settled quietly with a minimum of scandal,” he said, putting a definitive end to her plotting on that count. “The Lord Chancellor and the High Court will receive the letters, both the ones sent to you as well as the ones you took from Broadriver and from your husband. They will rule on the evidence as it is presented to them and take his testimony into consideration, though I doubt he will be able to say much which could sway them.”

Mina’s lower lip trembled at the mention of her father, but she otherwise did not react.

“Hannibal is suing for possession of Broadriver as compensation,” Will told her, wondering if the mention of its fate might stir something in her. “I imagine it will be granted. The next Earl of Reddig will have to settle for the townhouse, whoever he may be.”

“I never did like that ghastly place,” Mina murmured, reaching up to trace a starburst of frost on the windowpane.

“I suppose there is a silver lining,” Will said, cocking his head as he regarded her. “You won’t ever see Timothy again. The evidence of his complicity will be added to the charges already raised against him.”

“He’ll be executed for treason anyway. I always did warn him he was a fool,” Mina said, unmoved. “When I found out what he’d done, falling into bed with a foreign government, that is what started this whole business. So I suppose you could say, this is all his fault.”

Will felt her smile, felt the wry, bitter amusement in her voice, and he tensed in response.

“I couldn’t divorce him, couldn’t separate myself from him,” she breathed, her words fading to a mere whisper with the weight of her thoughts. “But I could escape him.”

“By becoming me?” Will asked, but it wasn’t a question, not anymore. Timothy would have been a traitor with a mad wife locked away in an asylum, in her first version of events. When that failed, he would have been a traitor whose wife took her own life out of shame. There was no version of Mina’s story Will would have emerged from unscathed, but she had always been the star of her own theater, all other roles incidental to her plot.

“Tell me, Will, what of Francis?” She trembled but refused to look at him, every inch the haughty lady offended, always playing her role with flair.

“We haven’t recovered his body from the river yet, but he is presumed dead,” Will said, his tone brisk. “He was stabbed by Mason and his fight with Hannibal was... brutal.”
“That wouldn’t have stopped him,” Mina mused, her smile wry.

“I stopped him,” Will admitted, unsettled but resolved to face what he’d done. “I told him I didn’t need him.”

“Then you as good as cut his throat,” Mina said, echoing Will’s own thoughts with uncanny accuracy.

“I regret the necessity, but I would do it again, if needs be,” Will said, his hand covering his sore belly beneath the loose spill of his maternity blouse. The stitches were a hard ridge beneath his drifting fingertips, one of the many scars he would bear from that hellish night. “I would do anything necessary to protect my children.”

“How lucky they are that you love them so much,” she said, a slight scold in her tone as if reproaching Will, as if he had not loved her to the point of folly where it had nearly cost him everything he held dear.

“Mina,” Will said, asking the question that meant the most. “Was it worth it?”

She finally looked at him. Not through him or around him or in his general direction, but at him, one twin to another, sister to brother.

“It would have been,” she said, and the expression on her face was so like their father’s that Will suppressed a shiver, shocked by the coldness he found in place of the warmth he’d always imagined. His throat constricted with grief he hadn’t allowed himself to feel, with pain he’d refused to acknowledge, the last bit of his faith in his sister’s love torn asunder by her calm, unfeeling words.

“Would you have regretted it, Mina?” he asked, honing his pain into strength, just as he had with their father. “One day, when my children called you ‘mother’ in my stead? When my husband returned from war and declared you an imposter? Would you have regretted it?”

She stared at him in silent consideration before whispering, “Who knows?”

“I think you would have,” Will murmured, looking at her with his Gift, seeing the fragile places half lost in shadow where her fears drew tight and thin, her sense of self as delicate as butterfly wings and easily fractured like glass. “How could you not? Pretending to be me? Everyone calling you by my name? Slowly but surely, it would erode you into nothing, your passions curbed, your life shackled to Hartford House, your lovers forsaken and your Dragon tamed. What future did you imagine here, Mina? Rich as Croesus with nothing to spend it on? Empty ballrooms and empty gardens and empty parlors, avoiding neighbors and tying lures to stave off boredom, telling lies to hide your sins?”

Her nostrils flared on a harsh inhale. Her pulse fluttered in her long throat, flickering beneath her skin, her mouth tightening on a frown.

“You would have regretted it, Mina,” Will said, whispering the words to her with a small smile. “As time and my children and your duties sapped your resolve, you would find no rest for your weary head in the long, lonely nights. And every time you looked in the mirror, you would be reminded of the brother you murdered as surely as you murdered yourself.”

She stared at him with the wild, dangerous eyes of a doe before the hunter, anger and horror trembling through her pale limbs and quivering on her lips as she saw the truth in his words.

A knock sounded on the door, sharp and firm, followed by Mr. Hawkes announcing, “They have come, my Lord.”

“Bring them in, Mr. Hawkes, thank you,” Will said, pushing to his feet with slow dignity and healthy respect for the trauma his body had undergone.

Mina watched him, her wild stare narrowing with suspicion, recognizing the contours of a trap but unable to discern its details. Suspicion gave way to alarm, however, when she saw the men who had come to fetch her.
“Will?” she said, her voice rising on a note of hysteria as he shooed the dogs out to make room. “Will, what’s going on?”

“You asked about Francis, Mina, but you never asked about yourself,” Will said, stepping to one side as the men approached her with the same wary alertness of Tier’s girls. “Did you imagine I would keep you here indefinitely? Rapunzel in her tower, trapped away from the world but still allowed to see it? None of our sisters wanted to deal with you and you have no male relatives left, so the decision fell to Hannibal. Rather, to me.”

“Will!” It came out a shriek as they seized her, shackling her arms and lifting her off of her feet. “Will!”

“These men are from Mayham Hospital,” Will said, watching with stoic reserve as she was dragged towards the door. “I’m sure you’ll find it very comfortable there, Mina.”

Her grasping fingers snared the front of his blouse, tightening like a vise and forcing the men to pause.

“After all,” Will murmured, prying her fingers loose one by one, “it is the same place you were going to send me at first, and I know you would never send me any place where I would ever be unhappy. Because you love me so much...”

“Will!” she mewled, her cries of his name turning to screams as she was bodily carried from the house.

He followed in her wake, an unwilling but resolute witness for those who no longer had eyes to see her fate.

“Will!” Mina screamed, fighting to hang onto the men as they pushed her into the bleak, enclosed wagon they’d arrived with. They slammed the door and locked it, one of them throwing bolts, the other turning keys in the padlocks.

Will gave them their fee for fetching her. There was no need for further instructions, as everything had been arranged through Mr. Buddish and the courts, which was lucky as very little could be heard over Mina’s panicked, outraged shrieking.

As the men took their places on the wagon, Will moved to the back to look in at his sister, who immediately grasped the bars and pressed her face to them, pleading, “Will! Will, darling! I’m so sorry! Please, don’t do this.”

Will searched her face, so like his and so different, identically different. It chilled him to think of how easily he could have become like her, driven to any extreme for his own desires, willing to sacrifice lives to get what he wanted, able to steal and lie and connive without conscience or hesitation.

“I hope you get well soon, Mina,” he said, his words soft and crooning. “I trust you understand why I cannot visit you where you’re going, but you’ll be in my thoughts. Always.”

“But, Will! No!” she begged, trying to slide her hand through the bars to reach him. “I’m not mad, Will! I’m sorry I hurt you! I promise you, I’ll be the sister you deserve! You’ve always been so good to me, Will! I only want to take care of you! Please, Will! I can’t go to such a place! I’m not mad!”

A dark, small smile curved Will’s lips and he whispered, “I know.”

She stared at him, incomprehension filling her wide blue eyes with confusion before she realized what he’d said. The wagon jolted into motion and she screamed, beating at the bars in a frenzy, shrieking his name.

Will stood in the drive until the falling snow muted the sound of her voice, until the rumbling wagon vanished behind a fog of swirling flakes. He waited to feel guilt or regret, but they never came.

The only thing he felt instead was enormous satisfaction.

Six Years Later

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Six Years Later

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A din of happy chaos filled Hartford House, spilling in through the open windows and open doors with the bright light of the afternoon sun. Guests lingered in the garden, talking and laughing and enjoying the pleasant weather as much as the bountiful hospitality of Hartford House.

Inside, where it was relatively cool, though not precisely peaceful, Will Lecter-Graham tugged on his jacket and checked his watch, smiling when he saw not too much time had passed. Winston, his coat a little rougher with age and not so swift as he used to be, heaved himself up to trail after him, following Will downstairs.

Randall Tier’s girls trotted towards him, heralding Hannibal’s arrival as surely as the warm pulse of his Alpha scent and the vibration of their bond. Will smiled with anticipation, every reunion a thrill of delight no matter how short the separation.

“You look very pleased for an Omega who just had champagne sloshed down his front,” Hannibal said, amber eyes crinkling in a grin as he approached. He reached out, unable to wait, and took Will’s hands in his to kiss them, adding, “But then, it gave a marvelous excuse to see you wear your new clothes. Nichola did an outstanding job—you look perfectly exquisite, Will.”

“Thank you very much,” Will said, indulging in a little preening under such appreciative scrutiny. “And thank Cousin Atticus for his stumble, as I had no plans to change to begin with.”

“I think it had more to do with the plunge of your décolletage than his clumsiness, the bounder,” Hannibal said, his voice falling into a low, displeased growl. His own gaze fell on the chest in question, bared to advantage by the cut of Will’s Omegan jacket, and his tone turned soft with appreciation when he said, “Nursing certainly only adds to your charms, my dear.”

“That’s not for you,” Will said to him, his smile turning wry as he added, “little good though it does to remind you. What is that you have? A letter?”

“Yes, another letter. It just arrived,” Hannibal said, releasing Will’s hand to tug the exposed envelope from his front pocket where he’d hastily tucked it.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, turning it to check the posting mark. “She’s very determined to speak to you, Will. Very determined, indeed.”

Will said nothing, though the bond seethed with a darkness Hannibal had come to associate with Will’s family. Rather than risk casting a pall over such a wonderful day, Hannibal slid the envelope into the breast pocket of his jacket out of sight.

“I’ll put it with the others,” he said, knowing Will greeted the news with mixed emotions. He closed the distance between them, hand straying down the exaggerated curve of Will’s slender back, tracing the hard stays hidden beneath the heavy cloth. Hoping to divert him with something more pleasant, he whispered, “That is still the most titillating piece of clothing ever created to test one’s discipline.”

“It had best not be testing it now,” Will huffed, angling a repressive look at him. “Jimmy just spent fifteen minutes getting me into this outfit, Hannibal. You can’t undo all of his hard work with your appreciation. Not yet, anyway.”

“Mm, but you smell absolutely luscious,” Hannibal purred, pressing his nose beneath the curve of Will’s jaw to draw a heady breath of his scent. “Even more so than usual. How soon?”
“Less than a month,” Will said, smirking. “Don’t get your hopes up. I’m spending this heat at Marsham Heath. Just me, my new bathtub, and an excellent book Freddie recommended. Ms. McClane has already located a wet nurse for me and it’s high time the baby is weaned.”

“Wouldn’t you rather spend your heat with me?” Hannibal coaxed, tipping his head to brush his lips up Will’s jaw and cheek, pressing his advantage when Will smiled.

“Hannibal, do you know how many children we have?” Will asked, leaning into his touch despite himself. “I’ll give you a moment to count.”

“Nonsense, I know precisely how many children we have,” Hannibal said, nibbling at Will’s earlobe. “Four.”

“Hannibal,” Will scolded.

“Five,” he corrected, grinning.

“In how many years?” Will pressed, raising his hand to cup Hannibal’s cheek, the pull of him nearly irresistible.

“Nearly seven,” Hannibal said without hesitation, defending himself with, “In my defense, you do tend to give them to me in pairs, Will. We’d have had three if you weren’t so keen on doubling your investment, as it were.”

“Doubling my—” Will cut off, elbowing his husband in favor of scolding him, saying, “I’ve had all of two heats in the last six years, Hannibal! I will enjoy this one! And unless you know of a way to successfully prevent adding to our brood, I will be enjoying it alone.”

“Alone?” Hannibal murmured, leaning close to rest his forehead to Will’s. “Without me?”

“‘Alone’ would generally preclude you, yes,” Will said, his determination wavering.

“No one got pregnant last night, did they?” Hannibal whispered, and was rewarded with a brilliant pink blush rising on his mate’s cheeks. “Hm?”

“No, you haven’t gotten pregnant so far,” Will admitted, his smile as wry as his sigh. “Very well, Hannibal. But I warn you, if I end up carrying again—”

“You’ll cosh me like you have every other time,” Hannibal purred, delighted by his decision, “and proceed to be the most adorable pregnant Omega in the world, followed by the best mother, all while performing your lordly duties. One wonders how you manage.”

Will allowed himself to be kissed, murmuring, “Flatterer.”

“It isn’t flattery if it’s true,” Hannibal said, nuzzling him for a deeper kiss.

“Papa!”

They pulled apart at the soft, sweet call, both of them smiling at the dainty little Omega running towards them, but Hannibal’s smile was particularly wide and enamored. Deep satisfaction and contentment poured through their bond every single time he laid eyes on their children, but especially when he looked at the solemn and wide-eyed replica of his mate, who very definitely knew they had their Papa wrapped around their little finger.

“Darling! You make that dress even more beautiful,” Hannibal called, and whispered to Will, “I thought Saturdays were pants days?”
“Saturdays are dress days now,” Will whispered back, stretching his hand out in encouragement. “At least temporarily.”

“Since when?” Hannibal asked, bewildered.

Will laughed and told him, “Since this morning when we saw Abigail’s dress and were overcome with envy.”

“Well, don’t tell Abigail I said so,” Hannibal said, bending to scoop them up and heft them high against his chest, his arm tucked firmly beneath them to steady them for a kiss, “but I think you look even more beautiful than she does, Saule.”

“Where are your brothers?” Will asked, straightening the bedraggled flower they’d poked into their dark curls and smoothing their cheek.

“With Grandy,” came the quiet reply, Saule’s sleepy blue eyes cutting to the doors outside before they ducked their head against Hannibal’s shoulder, shy of the crowd.

“With Grandy, is it? That should please him,” Hannibal said, rocking his little Omega in a hug. “Should we go sit with him for a while?”

Will nodded, saying, “I was going to check on him and we have some time before anyone notices we’re missing. We’ll have to hurry back, though. This reception is for you, after all.”

“With Aunt Margaret drinking and the orchestra playing,” Hannibal said with a smirk. “I imagine our guests are fully entertained.”

“She does so enjoy a celebration,” Will laughed, the three of them heading back the way Saule had come, the dogs milling around them. “Everyone is very proud of you, Hannibal. I hope you know that?”

“I do,” Hannibal said, rubbing Saule’s fragile back. “But the party couldn’t have managed such sweeping reforms without your keen intellect, Will. Unofficial member or not, you’ve been instrumental in helping Omegas and women gain the right to participate in government.”

“Not unofficial for much longer, I hope,” Will said, grinning. “Which is precisely why we’re celebrating, Councilman Lecter.”

“Well, you do know how much I enjoy spending endless hours with my exhausting relations,” Hannibal teased, and laughed when Will did, both of them thinking fondly of the irrepressible and eclectic Dimmonds.

The rest of the children were just where Saule had said, making busy chaos in Roland’s suite under Mr. Zeller’s watchful eye. Grandfather sat with a blissful smile on his face and the baby in his lap, enjoying the antics of their over-excited little ones.

“This is a cheerful sight,” Hannibal said, carrying Saule in to settle them next to Grandfather, who hugged them against his side, smiling his lopsided smile. He had never recovered fully from his stroke, but he had regained a remarkable amount of mobility and a fair amount of his speech, enough so to legally abdicate his position as the Duke of Westvale to his grandson and heir. Hannibal had feared he would fade without the title that was so much a part of him, but Roland spent every moment he could with his great-grandchildren and was delighted to have the weight of responsibility lifted off of his shoulders at long last.

“I thought I would read to you for a bit and take a break from our guests, Grandfather, but it looks as if you have visitors,” Will said, moving to kiss Roland’s cheek and lift the baby into his arms, cradling him with a soft purr to soothe his fussing. “I hope they haven’t exhausted you.”
“I think it’s the other way around, by the size of that yawn,” Hannibal remarked, noting more than one sleepy face among their children. He moved to kiss Grandfather’s forehead, asking, “Are you sure you don’t want to get dressed and come out?”

“N-no, it’s too much,” Roland said, waving a shaky hand at the suggestion. “I w-would rather stay here.”

“As you wish,” Hannibal said, smiling down at him. “But you do realize you’re about to be descended on by a bevy of Dimmonds?”

“An un-unavoidable fate, I fear,” Roland said, and uttered a raspy, breathless laugh.

“You’ve been minding Grandy, haven’t you?” Will asked, rocking the baby as he cast a serious look over his children.

“Yes, mama,” was the dutiful and undoubtedly inaccurate reply from them each, prompting Will to say, “Perhaps we should ring for nanny?”

“Ms. Starling needed a minute to catch her breath,” Zeller said, volunteering the information from a safe distance where the dogs had gone to rest. “Didn’t realize what she signed on for.”

“Saved by circumstances,” Hannibal said, grinning at the relief he saw on their beloved little faces.

“Grandy doesn’t want us to go! Grandy wants you to tell us a story, Papa,” Nigel said, the request taken up at once by a chorus of high, coaxing voices to which the baby added his burbling voice, only falling still when Will nuzzled him.

“A story?” Hannibal asked, seating himself with mock dignity on the settee next to Roland’s bed where Will had settled with their youngest propped up in the curve of his arm. “What sort of story? Shall I tell you of Chiyoh? How she traveled across the ocean to visit Nippon and take Lady Murasaki home at last?”

“Or perhaps how Abigail met Nicholas when she was abroad?” Will suggested, chuckling at the baby’s expression of utter astonishment to see his siblings pulling faces at him from the bed. “Or Papa could tell you some Lietuvan fairy tales. That should keep you all awake.”

“For the next several years, most likely,” Hannibal muttered.

“No, tell us your story!”

“Ah, yes!” Hannibal said, tapping his temple with one finger. “I’ll tell you of my summers in Lietuva!”

“No, Papa, of you and Mama,” Saule corrected, curling against Roland’s side, their beautiful dress forgotten in favor of the story they all were told from the moment Will’s waist began to thicken.

“Let me see, where should I begin?” Hannibal said, hefting Charlie up over his head before sitting back with the little boy in his lap, making room for Nigel to clamber up next to him. The little Alpha delved against Will’s side, seeking the calming assurance of his mother’s scent and settling at once, his slim fingers curling around the baby’s fat little foot. “I know, how about the Garden Party? Hm? It was a beautiful day at Fernhill and your cousin Bedelia was being entirely as impossible as she ever has been—”

“No, Papa, you start at the start!” Hannibal Lucas said, his expression of affront so identical to his father’s that Will had to turn his head away to hide his amusement, lest his eldest son take offense. “At the start!”

“At the start? You’re quite right, of course! How silly of me,” Hannibal said, casting a glance at Will as he said, “I suppose there’s time?”
“We'll make time,” Will promised with a smile, kissing the baby in his arms and hugging Nigel to his side. He stretched his hand out and Hannibal took it, fingers twining in a warm caress. The strength of their shared love swelled between them through their bond, powerful enough to overcome every shadow of their past without regret.

“Very well,” Hannibal said, drawing a deep breath and smiling at he held his husband’s bright blue gaze, “Thirty-eight years ago, the Earl of Reddig entered into a contract with the Duke of Westvale to give one of his grandchildren of marriageable age to the Duke’s grandson at a time when it suited him to one day marry. He happily put that contract behind him and did everyone the disservice of dying without mentioning said contract to his son...”

End

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