Summary

Proud. Unique. Determined. From the second Sebastian sensed Ciel Phantomhive’s soul, he realised their contract would be different. He was ready for it.

And so he waits. He hungers. He is getting obsessed. He will do anything to devour this soul, and the fragile attachment to the boy that has begun to spread its icy fingers in him will not stop him.

He thinks.

Notes

The story is based on *[anime only]* and will reflect the events that happened prior, during, and after the series, with original arcs intertwined with canon ones. I tend to regard all existing episodes as the components of one wholesome story, so the events will follow such chronological order: S1, episodes 1-16; Book of Circus; Book of Murder; Book of Atlantic; S1, episodes 17-24; S2. OVAs will also be explored, with ‘Ciel in Wonderland’ split between the end of S1 and the end of S2.

Regarding Sebastian/Ciel: the explicitly romantic things will take place after S2, after Ciel becomes somewhat older, but the story is tagged as pre-slash for a reason.

Feedback is much appreciated!
The coils of darkness blossomed beneath Ciel’s closed eyelids, dancing and twirling, taking various shapes. Frowning in annoyance, he opened his eyes, saw Sebastian watching him curiously, and closed them again, wishing to avoid any possibility of conversation.

It was better to see the flashes of imaginary darkness rather than to stare in the face of a real one.

They were going home after the tiresome, pompous ceremony that the Queen had organised to celebrate his return. Now, he was officially an Earl, the head of Phantomhive family. As Sebastian had said, the status, the title, the fortune — it all belonged to him now, along with a fiancée that Ciel hoped to avoid in the nearest future. He had too many problems to deal with as it was, and one of them was sitting across him, burning holes in him with his stare.

Sebastian was something Ciel couldn’t properly define. A demon? A servant? A teacher? Yes, he was definitely supposed to be all of the above, but there were also other definitions that Ciel had begun to apply to him, definitions that, in retrospective, seemed to have been founded on cringe-worthy, childish illusions.

Ciel tried to find other explanations for what he’d witnessed today, as they had been walking along that empty corridor, but he wasn’t in the habit of lying to himself.

He knew what he saw. When he turned abruptly, confident words on his tongue, he noticed a flicker of darkness coming from Sebastian. It lasted for no more than a second, but Ciel could swear it was there. He could also swear that he saw the claws of Sebastian’s true form, a feral half-grin, half-snarl on his face — but it all disappeared so quickly that at first, Ciel decided he’d imagined it. Now, though, the more he thought about it, the more details he recalled and the tenser he became.

If he was right, then Sebastian had been one step from breaking their contract and eating his soul right there, in the Queen’s palace. After all the time they had spent together. After everything.

Ciel didn’t want to believe it. But he had to find out for sure.

When their carriage stopped and Ciel stepped outside, he decided that it was pointless to hesitate.

He was a Phantomhive. He would never let doubts distract him.

“Sebastian,” Ciel said, and red eyes immediately focused on him.

“Yes, Master?”

“If I were to agree to the suggestion you’ve made today, in the palace, what would you do?”

A small, strange smile appeared on Sebastian’s lips. He didn’t say anything, though, and Ciel frowned.

“Tell me. Right now. This is an order!” he snapped.

“As you wish,” Sebastian bowed slightly, but Ciel could see that his smile was mocking. “I would consider it a breach of contract and I would claim your soul as mine.”

Ciel suspected it, after what he’d seen, but the words still shocked him. Flinching, he made a step
back before he could stop himself, feeling absurdly, strangely wounded. His eyes started to sting,
so he straightened and raised his chin, measuring Sebastian with what he hoped would pass for an
indifferent look.

“Make a special dinner for tonight,” he said coldly. “At least five courses. I will be in my study
room.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian replied, and Ciel’s skin crawled at the mockery he could hear in his
voice. Pressing his lips tightly together, he moved toward the house, making sure to keep his pace
unhurried and to hold himself with as much dignity as he could master at this moment.

When he finally got to the study room, he closed the door and leaned against it, staring at the
window unseeingly. Now, when he was safe from all ridiculing, dissecting attention, his eyes
began to brim with tears again, and Ciel bit his lower lip so hard he tasted blood in attempt to
collect himself.

He was a fool. A naïve idiot.

A child.

He knew what Sebastian was. He knew from the beginning. Demons weren’t capable of loyalty or
attachment — they were an empty, soulless shell, only interested in the meal they could acquire for
themselves.

But somewhere during these months, Ciel seemed to have forgotten about it. Or maybe, despite his
knowledge, he never managed to believe in it entirely — not until today.

Because he had trusted Sebastian. From the very first moments of making a contract with him,
before making a contract with him, he could tell that Sebastian had decency despite being a demon.
He had honestly warned him about the consequences of his decision and he began to fulfil his
responsibilities right from the start. He didn’t just kill those who tortured Ciel — he made them
suffer. He made them kneel and beg for their pathetic lives. Staring at the bleeding, moaning
masses with wide eyes, Ciel felt avenged. Protected. Later, when thinking of the name for his new
butler, Ciel had chosen ‘Sebastian’ because he planned to use the demon as his guard dog… and
because he felt safe with him. Before that day, before the life he had lived came to an end, he used
to turn to his dog Sebastian every time he felt scared or worried — whenever he needed comfort
yet didn’t want to disturb his parents.

From the first night, when Sebastian had brought hot milk to him, Ciel saw more than an ally in
him. He saw a caretaker. He remembered about their contract and he was going to give Sebastian
his soul when his revenge was complete, but… it seemed so far away right now. There were
numerous more important things they had to accomplish meanwhile – such as becoming an actual
Earl and a butler because at that point, they were only laughable copies. The fact that they had to
learn together soothed Ciel’s stinging pride, and soon, he started to regard Sebastian as the closest
thing to a friend he had.

It was strange, how bad Sebastian was at being a butler. Seemed like he had never had to perform
this particular duty before — and to be honest, it looked like Sebastian hadn’t even visited the
human world for quite a while. Otherwise, how could he be so terrible at such basic things as
cooking and cleaning? How could he prepare all those fatty, spicy meals and think that the stomach
of someone Ciel’s age would be able to handle it?

In other circumstances, Ciel would have been annoyed at how useless his servant was, but here, he
was almost glad.
He felt less lonely this way.

He and Sebastian worked hard together, and all the challenges they were persistently overcoming only strengthened Ciel’s perception of Sebastian as of something other than a demon.

When Ciel tasted the liquid that Sebastian called tea and calmly poured it onto his hands as punishment, he didn’t see him as some terrifying being that he should be wary of. He saw a servant who made a mistake and who had to do better next time.

When Sebastian determined the number of strikes Ciel would get for mistakes in his studies and then delivered them, steadily and mercilessly, Ciel saw him as a teacher. When Sebastian gave him advice as to how to shoot and how to ride a horse, he saw him as a mentor. At night, seeing how Sebastian dealt with the intruders, be that marauders, thieves, or someone’s hired fists, Ciel saw him as a protector, even if he was annoyed by the racket.

He first saw him as someone close to a friend when he woke up from another nightmare, gasping and shaking from terror, and Sebastian was there. He wasn’t genuinely worried for him — Ciel could see it. His eyes and his voice were indifferent when he asked if Ciel was all right, and he readily turned to leave when Ciel recoiled from his touch, on the verge of desperate panic. Even when Ciel swallowed his pride and asked him to stay, the look in Sebastian’s eyes didn’t change — it remained calm and unmoving, as if he couldn’t care less. He failed to do even something as trivial as this normally — going to the window, he froze there like a statue, and no matter how much Ciel wanted to ask him to sit next to him, he would sooner die than say it aloud.

And yet… seeing Sebastian in his room, guarding him from his fears, made Ciel feel warm. This feeling grew stronger as he heard what he identified as pride in Sebastian’s voice and saw his grins when Ciel did something right, and it made him believe that he wasn’t the only person feeling it. He clung to this fragile thread of connection between them, letting it fill the emptiness he had been feeling for what seemed like ages, and he imagined it growing gradually every day.

All the progress they achieved together, the way they praised and congratulated each other, wordlessly or otherwise, meant something. It had to mean something. Right?

But then there was this visit to the Queen, and Ciel’s illusions vanished like smoke.

Protector? Friend? What a joke! Earls didn’t become friends with butlers, especially when these butlers were also demons.

And Sebastian was a demon. How humiliatingly embarrassing it was of Ciel to ever consider him as something else, something more.

Never again.

Numbly, Ciel touched his face and was content to realize that no tears fell. He was not a cry-baby, and no demon would reduce him, a Phantomhive, to tears.

Anger, hurt, and bitterness remained, though, and no matter how hard he tried, Ciel couldn’t get rid of them.

That disgusting creature. Maybe it wasn’t the demon’s fault for being what it was — it was Ciel who had foolishly imagined depth where there was none, but how could Sebastian try to provoke him into breaking the contract? He had deliberately asked his question in a way that seemed harmless. Ciel hadn’t even suspected anything until he analysed his memories carefully.

What pathetic, revolting treachery.
Sebastian had to be punished.

Clenching his fists hard enough to hurt, Ciel walked out of his study room, trying to move as quietly as he could. Sebastian had to be busy in the kitchen — he still wasn’t used to cooking manually, step by step, and with Ciel’s order, it had to him ages to get the dinner done.

Ciel would have smiled at the thought of how annoyed and frustrated Sebastian must feel right now, but his heart was too heavy to allow him any sort of amusement. When he stepped outside, the sky had already darkened. It wasn’t cold, but when the strong wind crashed into him, Ciel shivered, wrapping his hands around his middle miserably.

The frown was still wrinkling his forehead as he moved toward the cliff, leaving the house behind. The lights there were shining brightly, making it seem as if every room had a host that was going to return at any moment.

But they wouldn’t. And if Sebastian was indeed a terrible butler, then Ciel risked not returning home as well.

He stopped at the cliff, glancing at what was beneath it, trying to calculate how much distance separated him from the bottom. Enough to kill him if he fell all the way down, but also enough to give Sebastian an opportunity to catch him before Ciel reached his death.

Grimly, Ciel looked at the shape of the house, then stared at the bottom of the cliff once again. Then, forcing himself to swallow down the sudden flare of fear, he stepped into nothingness.

The cold wind burned his face. He didn’t scream, even though he wanted to, biting through his already torn lip to keep his terror inside. The ground was approaching rapidly and Ciel closed his eyes in defeat — and then strong hands caught him and the air roared in his ears. He blinked, his mind confused at the sudden change, and a second later, he was already standing on the solid ground, back on the top of the cliff, with Sebastian staring at him unblinkingly.

‘He really does move at lightning speed,’ Ciel thought, taking a deep, slow breath. His limbs were shaking, so he tried to hide his hands behind his back to mask it before he realised how stupid he must look.

"Why on earth would you do something like that?" Sebastian wondered. He leaned closer, examining Ciel with his red eyes, and the genuine curiosity there tugged sharply at something in Ciel’s chest.

“I was checking whether you are worthy of consuming my soul,” he said coldly, and saw how Sebastian’s eyes widened in surprise, how he leaned even closer and inhaled deeply, as if trying to understand his mind through his smell. The burning curiosity that was practically emanating from him was one of the most honest feelings Ciel had sensed within Sebastian. However, looking closer at him, he could recognise something more than just curiosity. There was an actual interest there. The intrigued expression that made Sebastian’s bland face suddenly look alive.

Something clicked in Ciel’s mind then, and he nearly gasped from revelation.

So that’s what it was. Maybe all demons were like this, or maybe Ciel had lucked out and gotten himself an incredibly picky one, but just drawing a contract wasn’t enough for Sebastian. When Ciel was taking pleasure from the time they spent together, Sebastian was getting bored. He wanted a thrill; he wanted a game. By provoking Ciel at the palace, he had been checking whether Ciel deserved his continued loyalty and his service, however artificial they were. He had been testing whether Ciel’s soul was worthy of being cultivated and consumed as a luxurious meal, or if all it
deserved was to serve as a quick snack and then fade into oblivion.

Sebastian wanted a worthy Master. Someone he couldn’t predict or understand easily.

Fortunately for him, Ciel was more than prepared to provide him with this. He would ensure that Sebastian had the worst headache a demon could ever get — if they could even get one.

It didn’t lessen the acidic taste of betrayal on his tongue, but at least now, Ciel understood.

And he wasn’t going to forget about it.

Ciel rose to his toes, and when Sebastian continued to watch him curiously, he slapped him on the face as hard as he could, making sure that his rings connected with the bone.

Watching how Sebastian’s jaw dropped from sheer astonishment filled his blood with thick, dark pleasure.

“This is for acting in such an embarrassing manner today,” Ciel uttered lowly, narrowing his eyes when Sebastian just gaped at him, still looking shocked. “Do you take me for a fool? That little provocation of yours didn’t go unnoticed. I will let it slide, but only this once. Do you understand me, Sebastian? If you ever try to insult me by such petty, dishonourable acts again, I will be the one to consider it a breach of contract. You are my servant. You are supposed to protect me — and not just physically. You have no right to try and push me into making a mistake that would benefit you. If you want my soul, then earn it instead of trying to cheat!”

For a while, Sebastian continued to stand like a statue, but slowly, the look of amazement on his face started to change. When he bowed, his eyes were glistening with interest so intense that even Ciel was taken aback by it.

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian murmured, and this time, there were no mocking notes in his voice.

Bitterly satisfied, Ciel turned away from him and moved back to the house, feeling hopelessly, endlessly tired. Sebastian disappeared in the kitchen, probably worried about the dinner, and Ciel used those moments to collapse into his armchair and close his eyes, hoping to let his mind rest. To his anger, though, it refused to be subdued, and instead proceeded to shove the images of Sebastian in front of him, reminding him about the numerous small moments they had shared.

The way he and Sebastian argued about what books Ciel should read, with Sebastian insisting on the piece written more than a hundred years ago and Ciel claiming that it was too old and thus irrelevant for their time.

The way Sebastian helped him get dressed, both of them utterly confused by the various buttons and laces. Ciel remembered how annoyed Sebastian started to appear after the third failed attempt to dress him properly, and how he apologised and disappeared for an hour before coming back and doing everything flawlessly. Ciel had asked where he could possibly manage to learn all the intricacies of dressing in less than sixty minutes, but Sebastian refused to answer, looking so sour as if he had bitten into a lemon.

The way Sebastian seemed to channel Ciel’s anxiety when the Queen’s letter arrived, how he fussed over Ciel more than usual to make sure he looked perfect, how he watched him in that huge, cold throne room filled with people Ciel didn’t know. Sebastian and his aunt were the only ones he recognised, but it was Sebastian who Ciel kept staring at because it was Sebastian who brought him comfort, even when he was just standing motionlessly. Sebastian watched him back, and Ciel thought… hoped… that the worry he had noticed in his eyes was genuine and that he hadn’t
imagined it.

Lies. All lies. And even worse — not lies, but illusions. Illusions that Ciel himself had constructed and which were all shattering now, hurting him so much that he wanted to cry, still.

He held on. Sebastian served the dinner and Ciel had even managed to eat something, even though he did not feel any taste. Throughout the meal, he could feel Sebastian’s gaze on him, but for now, Ciel chose to ignore it.

He had never been so relieved to go to bed as in this night. Sebastian, probably sensing Ciel’s relief and having no idea what was causing it, opened his mouth to ask, but Ciel interrupted him sharply and barked, “Get out.”

A small frown touched Sebastian’s forehead, but it smoothed out almost instantly. Giving one last bow, Sebastian left, and Ciel was finally, blissfully alone. His consciousness, as if understanding this, pushed the tears back to the surface, and Ciel gritted his teeth, furious with himself.

He hadn’t cried when he learned that his parents died. He hadn’t cried when he saw their graves, and he would surely not cry because of some demon!

But hot, suffocating tears refused to be restrained this time, and the first and then the second ones burned Ciel’s cheeks, making a quiet, pained sound escape him. He immediately closed his mouth with his hands, terrified that Sebastian could hear, but when minutes passed and no one came in, Ciel hid his face in his pillow, choking down all sounds but letting the tears fall.

He would grieve tonight. Not for the demon — that being was not worthy of Ciel’s pain, but for the last form of connection Ciel thought he had left. With it gone, he was alone, and now he knew he would stay alone till the very end.

So yes, he would grieve tonight, but tomorrow… he would wake up stronger.

And he would never allow himself such disgusting weakness again.
From Weakness to Strength

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your feedback - I'm so happy you liked the start! This chapter has gotten too long, but there was a lot to explore. Hope you'll enjoy it as well :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The second letter from the Queen came a week after the ceremony, and Ciel stared at the text in confusion, unsure if he understood everything correctly. Feeling lost, he raised his eyes and found Sebastian’s questioning stare.

“Is everything all right, Young Master?” Sebastian asked, and Ciel shrugged, looking at the letter again.

“Yes. It is just…” he hesitated, studying the curved letters once again. “There has been a series of murders. Apparently, the Queen wants me to participate in the investigation.”

“What do you find so startling about it?” Sebastian raised his eyebrow in the expression of polite interest that Ciel started to find incredibly annoying. “From what you told me, I understand that the members of your family have served as the Queen’s Watchdogs for decades. What a distasteful byname,” he added, and Ciel rolled his eyes, annoyed even more.

“No one asked for your opinion,” he grumbled. “And yes, the Phantomhives have always been known as the Queen’s Watchdogs. But my age… What I mean is—” Ciel fell silent when Sebastian just continued to look at him blandly, as if he had no idea what Ciel could be getting at.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Ciel hid the letter and rubbed his forehead tiredly.

The damned demon. He probably didn’t understand that being twenty and controlling the underworld differed significantly from being eleven and doing the same. Ciel had thought that the Queen must surely be aware of it, so he found the letter shocking — unpleasantly so.

However, complaining about it aloud would imply that Ciel considered himself a child, and he would never allow himself to even hint at something like that, no matter what.

He could worry about his inexperience in his thoughts. The most important thing now was to hide his anxiety and insecurity from Sebastian.

Sebastian couldn’t see him as weak, or at least weaker than Ciel had already shown himself as. If he lost all respect for him, all his interest…

“Make me a chocolate cake,” Ciel commanded. “And prepare a carriage. We will be leaving in two — no, three hours. Tanaka is going to return from the hospital in two weeks and I would like to be done with this case by that time.”

“Certainly,” bowing, Sebastian disappeared, and Ciel leaned against his armchair, taking a deep breath.
Make me a cake. Prepare the bath. Clean up this room. Get rid of the visitors. For this last week, their conversations were based on this only — Ciel gave the most crucial orders and refused to summon Sebastian for anything else, even though a part of him was withering from strange, repugnant feeling of heartache every time he sent Sebastian away.

No prolonged contact. No actual conversations. No closeness. Ciel couldn’t always maintain such new routine — there were alarming holes in the icy wall he was so carefully constructing, but he hoped… no, he knew that with time, there would be no holes left. With time, he would look at Sebastian and marvel at how he could ever see him as something more than a demonic pawn.

If only Sebastian wasn’t making things so much more difficult… it seemed like the colder Ciel became, the more closeness Sebastian craved. Now, unless Ciel gave him an order, Sebastian chose to stay in the room with him, sometimes overly close, and whenever Ciel barked at him to move away, all he got in response was a slow, intrigued smile. Sebastian did follow his orders, but he moved back in his proximity whenever he could, and it was driving Ciel crazy.

Did this demon find coldness alluring? He couldn’t care about the distance Ciel was trying to put between them, so the only other explanation was that Sebastian saw right through him, and that he was deliberately trying to make Ciel’s life difficult. Everything was a game to this creature.

And now this letter… Ciel had no idea how to even approach the murder case. He wasn’t an investigator — his fath… his predecessor had never shared any details of his work with him, so Ciel only knew the basics. According to the letter, four people had been found dead, poisoned by something known as Abrus precatorius. Ciel supposed it was some kind of plant, but he wasn’t sure, and with the distance that he had been trying to put in between himself and Sebastian, he was hesitant as to whether he should ask his demon anything.

Four poisoned people.

Where to start?

When Sebastian brought him his chocolate cake, Ciel still hadn’t come up with anything. He ate his dessert slowly, stopping after every bite to recall the tiniest bits of information he had heard from his predecessor. There had to be some connections left, people who would agree to work with him. If the fact that he was eleven didn’t matter to the Queen, then it wouldn’t matter to these people, too — and if it did, Ciel would make sure to change their minds quickly.

There was something that was stopping him from enjoying his cake properly. Something other than his thoughts.

Looking up, Ciel frowned, seeing that Sebastian was still standing in his study room, watching him attentively.

“Why are you still here?” he asked.

“You haven’t given me any order, so I decided to stay with you. Is the dessert to your liking?”

“It is all right,” Ciel put away his fork, curious at how Sebastian frowned at the sight of it, as if he found Ciel not finishing what he’d cooked offensive.

At times, Sebastian’s strange desire to achieve perfection in everything he was doing was funny. Ciel would have let himself smile before, but not now, when the memory of Sebastian’s treachery was still so fresh in his mind.

The darkness emanating from Sebastian as he reached to touch him… his clawed hand that sought
to grab him by the shoulder, in one and final touch… knowledge that if Ciel hadn’t turned then, he
would be dead right now — soulless, non-existent, condemned to having only darkness as his
company because he had no chance to meet those he loved again…

His heart clenched miserably and Ciel lowered his head, staring at the half-eaten cake with fury
that it didn’t deserve.

“Take it away,” he said coldly. “I have lost my appetite.”

Sebastian lingered, still frowning, but then he took the plate reluctantly.

“Was something wrong with the cake?” he asked. “It is your favourite. This time, I wanted to
enhance the flavour, so I’ve added…”

“I don’t care!” Ciel exploded. “Just take it away, I don’t want it!”

Sebastian pressed his lips together tightly, in a way that Ciel knew spoke of his desire to grab him
like he had done during the first night they spent together. Ciel tensed, wondering if they were
going to repeat that experience, but all Sebastian did was disappear with the plate wordlessly.

Ciel relaxed as the tension left his body now that he wasn’t in the danger of being touched. He
looked at where the letter was lying, knowing the text written there by heart, and stood up
abruptly.

He wasn’t going to wallow in his misery, not again. He wouldn’t let the name of his family, his
name, be sullied by his own incompetence.

If the Queen wanted the case solved, then Ciel would do everything in his power to ensure it.

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By the time they arrived to London, Ciel had finally realised what he had to do. As soon as he
walked into his London house, he hurried upstairs, to where the office of head of Phantomhive’s
family was supposed to be. The majority of correspondence his fath… predecessor had was
destroyed, burnt in the fire, but there had to be at least some letters — something that would tell
Ciel where to start and whom to contact.

It took him a while to find what he needed, but when he finally discovered boxes upon boxes of
letters, he froze in indecision.

He wouldn’t be able to do it alone. And — well, he didn’t have to, did he? After all, he had a
servant who was supposed to assist him in whatever Ciel needed.

“Sebastian,” he called and started to wait. One second. Two. Three. Then the door opened, and Ciel
continued without turning, “I need you to help me to sort through the letters. They might be useful
in this investigation.”

“Of course,” Sebastian replied politely. “However, first, please try this.”
Ciel finally turned and his eyes widened as he saw Sebastian holding a plate of some chocolate
dessert.

Not that he minded, but…

“What is it? I don’t think it is time for dessert,” he said, frowning.

“You didn’t like the cake I prepared back at the mansion, so I decided it is my duty as a butler of
the Phantomhive family to offer you an alternative. Please, try it and tell me if you like it better.”

“If I hadn’t liked the cake you’ve made at home, I would have made you eat it,” Ciel drawled,
staring at the plate in concentration.

What a ridiculous demon. Ciel had indeed wanted him to be perfect, but who knew Sebastian
would get downright obsessed with corresponding to the standards Ciel had set for him?

He had no desire to eat any kind of dessert now, but it seemed like at least one foolish part of him
survived the betrayal because Ciel suddenly found it difficult to deny Sebastian. He imagined him
rushing to the kitchen as soon as they arrived, getting everything ready, changing the recipe and
preparing a cake that he thought Ciel would like…

Ridiculous. That demon was crazy.

And yet, Ciel nodded and went to sit at the table, waiting for Sebastian to set and serve everything.
When it was done, he tried the first fork and closed his eyes briefly in pleasure.

“It is good,” he said shortly, and saw how Sebastian smiled in satisfaction.

This time, Ciel forced himself to finish the entire portion. Sebastian was positively glowing at the
sight of it, and hiding an answering smile was getting more and more difficult.

“Clean it all up and come back,” Ciel ordered instead, trying to keep his voice strict. “As I said, I
will need your assistance.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian gathered everything in less than a second and disappeared — only to
reappear again, still radiating the absurd amount of pleasure.

“Here’s the letter that I received from the Queen,” Ciel offered him an already torn envelope.
“Read this.”

Curiosity flashed across Sebastian’s face as he accepted the letter and started to read. When he
looked up, Ciel thought his eyes looked redder than usual.

“I have never participated in investigations before,” Sebastian noted. “What is it that you would
like to know? Perhaps the origins of the poison Scotland Yard has managed to identify?”

Ciel could have agreed — if not for the condescending notes he recognised in Sebastian’s words. It
made him immediately defensive, so he scoffed.

“I will find out about it by myself,” he said confidently. “You, on the other hand, search through
these letters and give me those that you think will help me to establish connections with the
underworld. My fa— the previous Earl had many useful people at his disposal. I need to know who
they are and how to contact them.”

Sebastian lowered his head in a nod, hiding an indulgent smirk, and fury that flooded Ciel in
response was so strong that his temples began to throb with it, urging him to step to this demon and to hit him until that smirk disappeared, until an expression of respect and wariness replaced it instead.

Breathing through his nose slowly, Ciel left the room and walked toward the library, hoping that it would have some books about different kinds of poison.

He would stay up all night if he had to but he would find an answer. Without asking Sebastian.

He could do everything by himself.

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As it could be expected, Sebastian had finished his task sooner than Ciel, so in an hour, they were already travelling to someone known as the ‘Undertaker’. He was the most prominent figure mentioned in the letters, even in those that didn’t include him as a writer or an addressee, so Ciel decided they should visit him today, without delays. Now that he started studying the books about poisons, he was getting strangely excited. The thought of being defeated, disappointing the Queen, and embarrassing his family’s name still made his blood go cold with dread, but instead of letting it stop him, Ciel chose to transform everything into a challenging game.

He would find the perpetrator, no matter what. Now that he had an initial course of actions in mind, the task stopped seeming impossible and anticipation was pushing him forward.

When the carriage stopped, Ciel jumped outside before Sebastian could open the door for him. He stormed into the tall building without knocking and stopped at the threshold, his jaw dropping open.

A funeral parlour.

He should have guessed. Who else would call himself an ‘Undertaker’?

Sebastian followed him inside, looking around curiously. The silence in this place was piercing, heavy with something that Ciel couldn’t identify. He cleared his throat, hoping to attract the attention of the owner if he was here, and jumped when someone suddenly grabbed his hand.

A tall man with long grey hair stood next to him, staring at him expressionlessly. Ciel opened his mouth to protest against being grabbed like that when Sebastian snatched him from the stranger’s grip and jumped away, holding him close, his hands wrapped around Ciel’s middle protectively.

A rush of something warm washed over Ciel, sending shivers down his spine, but he shook his head, clearing it from unwanted sensations, before focusing on the owner.

“What are you the Undertaker?” he asked grimly, and a small smile touched the man’s lips.

“Yes, I most surely am. It is a pleasure to meet you again, Earl Phantomhive,” the small smile grew into a wide grin and Ciel shivered once again, this time from a disturbing feeling he couldn’t
properly identify.

There was something unnatural in that grin. Something inhuman.

“‘Again’?” he repeated. “I have never seen you before.”

“Oh, but memory is such a fickle thing,” Undertaker stepped toward them and Ciel felt how Sebastian’s grip around him tightened.

“I would prefer it if you kept your distance from my Master,” Sebastian uttered, his voice, usually amused, now hard with unmistakable threat.

“Oh, and you would be..?” for a second, Ciel saw a flash of the man’s strange greenish eyes, how they flared with malice, before the long bangs covered them again.

“This is my butler,” Ciel said aloud and tapped against Sebastian’s wrist, signifying that he wanted to be let go without attracting attention to it. When Sebastian continued to hold him, Ciel gritted his teeth, annoyed, and then forcibly removed himself from his grip.

Later, they would have to devise a system of signals that only the two of them could understand. It could be useful in the future, during other investigations.

If there would be anything after this. If Ciel didn’t fail.

“I came to you because I know you worked with the previous Earl,” he announced, satisfied with how confident and calm he sounded. “I have taken his place now. The Queen has given me the task of investigating the recent series of murders. Four people have been poisoned with——”

“The Queen, hmm?” Undertaker let out a strange, giggling noise. “She doesn’t lose any time, does she? And neither do you. You are lucky, Earl, at least today, as I have the latest body in this humble home of mine — would you like to see it?”

“The body?” for a moment, Ciel felt confused. What would he need the body for? And seeing the dead… again… After…

No. He would never let himself be weak — he wouldn’t! Not to mention that he needed to show this bizarre person that he was made from stronger stuff.

“Yes,” Ciel said confidently. “Show me the body.”

“Are you sure?” Undertaker’s grin widened to the point of being crazed, and Ciel glared at him.

“I do not like to repeat my orders,” he warned, and flushed when the insufferable man only laughed at him. However, he walked to the set of big grey boxes and started to open them one by one, muttering something under his breath.

“Usually, I require a certain payment for my services,” he noted. “But today, I will share the information with you for free, Earl. This is indeed your lucky day. Oh! Here he is!”

Without warning, Undertaker pushed the box right at Ciel, and a rotting body that was lying there jumped from the impact. The wave of sickening, unnaturally sweet smell filled Ciel’s nostrils immediately, and when he saw the yellow skin with deep, ugly spots, nausea and a primitive fear spiralled, rising to his throat and blocking his airways.

Gasping, Ciel turned and threw himself at Sebastian without thinking, hiding his face in his
stomach and breathing in his calming, soothing scent. A moment passed, and then he realised what
he had done.

And he realised something else, too.

Sebastian wasn’t holding him back. He stood motionlessly, cold and indifferent, probably waiting
for Ciel to unhand him.

Mortified, Ciel recoiled, feeling an even more humiliating blush travel up his neck. He was still
afraid to look at the body, but he was even more afraid to look at Sebastian. Not after this terrible
display of weakness.

How could he lower himself to something like this? After everything! Sebastian would despise him
again. Who would want a soul of a weakling?

“As I thought,” Undertaker drawled, and even though Ciel felt too ashamed to look at him, he
forced himself to raise his head. “A good butler would know that children shouldn’t look at such
morbid things. It might traumatiser their fragile, unstable minds to the point where they would no
longer be themselves.”

Risking a brief glance at Sebastian, Ciel noticed a displeased frown on his face.

Well. Maybe it would distract him from Ciel’s disgrace, at least for a while. Sebastian hated being
accused of not fulfilling his duties properly.

But he would remember it. He would remember how Ciel had gotten scared of someone’s dead
body like a small, witless child. He would remember that he was the one who Ciel turned — no,
clung to, for comfort. He would remember, and he would consider him pitiful.

No!

Clenching his fists, Ciel turned to the body and stepped to it bravely, fighting nausea that instantly
welled up in him again.

“Nonsense,” he said carelessly. “I just didn’t expect the body to be in such a bad shape. If he is the
latest victim, then he was killed yesterday. The degree of…” Ciel paused, desperately trying to
recall the word he needed. “…of decomposition, is startling. It is the end of March, so it’s rather
cold outside, and the body had to look fresher.”

“What an insight, Earl!” Undertaker exclaimed, and Ciel narrowed his eyes, attempting to
determine whether he was being mocked or not. Carefully, he looked at Sebastian again and
relaxed at the sight of the usual curious expression on his face. “However, some people are so
distasteful that they continue to be so even after their death… if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t care,” Ciel interrupted him sharply. So far, the visit here had been a waste of time. “Is
there any relevant information you can share with me? If you need payment, I can—”

“Oh no, I’ve already told you — no payment is needed today. Not from you, my Earl,” another
crazy grin blossomed on Undertaker’s lips. “I am truly so happy to see you… I would celebrate our
meeting but I’m afraid there is no time for that today. Do you know the new café that opened three
streets from here? It has a very un-delicious name, “The Flowers of Mary”. But it serves the
tastiest desserts and many young ladies frequent it. Sometimes their husbands come in, too. Four of
them have been found dead after their visits, though, so if you choose to go there, I advise you to be
careful.”
Ciel, who had been feeling more and more annoyed at the irrelevant story, perked up.

“All victims visited the same café?” he clarified, and Undertaker shrugged.

“They are all dead, aren’t they?” he asked. Ciel had no idea how it was related to his question, but he had gotten more than he could hope for.

If what Undertaker had told him was the truth, of course.

“Thank you,” Ciel said mildly. “If the information you provided turns out to be valuable, I will not forget your cooperation. I’ll be seeing you again. Come, Sebastian.”

Without waiting for an answer, Ciel left the parlour, still embarrassed because of his mortifying lapse of judgement, but hopeful.

If all victims had visited one and the same place shortly before their deaths, it could only mean one thing. But…

Ciel stopped abruptly, realising he didn’t know how to proceed. To go to that café today? Or to leave it for tomorrow and write a report to the Queen instead? Did he have to write the reports in the first place, or should he do that only after he finished the case? What about Scotland Yard? They had to have some important files on the victims. Were they aware that Ciel was participating in their investigation, too, or did he have to inform them by himself? And… if Undertaker knew such a crucial piece of information, why did he not share it with anyone?

A strange sensation of someone violating his personal space broke into Ciel’s thoughts. Blinking, he refocused and flinched as he saw Sebastian inches from his face, staring at him with inscrutable expression and… smelling him?

“What the hell are you doing!” Ciel shouted. Sebastian, clearly taken aback, frowned.

“I was merely checking if you are all right,” he said. “You stopped moving without any apparent reason and didn’t answer me when I called you. Your smell is the only other thing that can indicate what feelings you are currently experiencing — not all of them, but it can give me a hint as to what —”

“Never do that again. This is an order!” Ciel hissed, looking around to make sure no one witnessed this humiliating scene. “You cannot just smell people like that. Have you ever even formed contracts with humans, or am I the first unfortunate soul you have encountered?”

To Ciel’s immense satisfaction, Sebastian’s mask cracked, and for a second, he actually looked affronted.

A new look on him. And tremendously pleasing one at that.

“Indeed I have,” he uttered. “Many times.”

“Then how can you not know that people don’t smell each other like that?”

“I never had to do that before as my previous Masters—” Sebastian stopped and narrowed his eyes. “In the end, it does not matter. I apologise for inconveniences and I promise to never do that again if it offends you.”

“It offends everyone,” Ciel growled. “I can’t believe you didn’t know about that. Aren’t you supposed to be smart?”
Sebastian’s lips tightened, filling Ciel with a rush of vindictive satisfaction.

At least he wasn’t the only one acting like an idiot today.

“I believe I owe you another apology,” Sebastian said, and Ciel sent him a suspicious stare.

“What for?” he asked warily.

“For letting you look at that body. The Undertaker was right. Children shouldn’t look at such disturbing things.”

That hateful, ugly blush returned, and Ciel felt his face burn in the way he utterly despised.

“I am not a child!” he protested vehemently. “Not anymore! And I am fine with looking at the bodies. It’s just that one was too… its colour, the spots on it—”

“Ah, I understand it now,” Sebastian smiled innocently, and the already familiar desire to hit him was so strong that Ciel barely stopped himself from acting on it. “You are fine with fresh bodies, but you do not like decomposed or mutilated ones.”

“Mutilated might be fine, too,” Ciel stated haughtily. “I haven’t seen them yet. And least not that well.”

Sebastian pressed his hand to his lips, probably hiding a grin, and Ciel turned away from him in a huff.

Stupid demon. Instead of doing something useful, all he did was try to provoke him.

“We are going to that café,” Ciel announced. “It’s not late yet, so it must be still open.”

“As you wish,” Sebastian agreed.

They spent the rest of the way in silence.

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The café was small and the choice of desserts was not that big. Ciel studied the menu carefully, trying to guess which of the meals could contain the poison, but without knowing anything about its taste and flavour, there wasn’t much he could do. To be on the safe side, he ordered a chocolate cake that he knew of personally. If there was anything wrong with its taste, he would notice it immediately.

Sebastian seemed distracted, staring somewhere at the wall, but Ciel decided to leave him be for now. Slowly, he watched the small room, taking his time to remember the customers and the smiling girls who carried the trays between the tables.

Nothing seemed amiss. An ordinary place, with a rather boring menu. Sebastian had cooked him more kinds of desserts than were presented here, even though two months ago, he had no idea how
to make the basic pie without his demonic tricks.

When his chocolate cake was served, Ciel eyed it critically before tasting a bit. It was bland — as bland as he could expect from a place like this. Sebastian’s chocolate cake was superior to this pale copy.

Sighing, Ciel pushed the plate closer, cut his piece into several large chunks, and began to eat. At this moment, he didn’t care how he looked — he just wanted to finish this tasteless dessert quickly and to go home. It was a mistake to come here today — he had learned more than enough already and he needed time to sort through all pieces of information he received.

When the last chunk disappeared, Ciel sighed in relief and turned to his cup of tea, hoping that it would soothe the strange, unpleasant sensations in his dissatisfied stomach. He looked at Sebastian, wondering if he stopped finding the wall so interesting, and nearly choked when a pair of very red, very displeased eyes stared back at him.

“What?” Ciel blurted out.

“Did you truly enjoy this,” Sebastian pointed at the empty plate, “more than the chocolate dessert I have made for you?”

Oh no. This again?

“Why would you think that?” Ciel asked, and Sebastian’s eyebrow twitched, signifying that he was even unhappier than Ciel had thought initially.

“You didn’t finish the morning cake and you have spent eleven minutes on consuming the one I’ve made in the afternoon. You finished this one in less than four minutes. What was so special about it? Based on the flavour, both cakes I’ve made smelled stronger and thus better.”

“Stronger doesn’t always mean better,” Ciel replied automatically, wondering if they were actually having this conversation. He couldn’t decide if he found this Sebastian’s obsession funny or annoying. “And I didn’t like this one better. I just wanted to finish it quickly. Let’s go, I’m tired and I don’t think we will learn anything else today.”

Sebastian started to say something, but then his eyes snapped open to the door behind the counter. Ciel followed his gaze and frowned, seeing a middle-aged woman with bright red hair. There was nothing special about her, so he opened his mouth to ask Sebastian, but Sebastian was already bending toward his ear, whispering, “This woman uses the kind of poison that killed those four men whose death we are investigating.”

“What? How can you tell?”

“I know how this specific poison smells like. It clings to her as the second skin, subduing all other smells in this place.”

Ciel looked at the woman again, more intently this time. He still didn’t see anything amiss, but he had no reason to doubt Sebastian — not in this. And if this woman was indeed a killer…

Disappointment crashed into him, followed by irrational anger.

What kind of investigation was this? Undertaker had told him where to look and Sebastian pointed out the culprit. What a boring, unfulfilling experience!

Frustrated, Ciel stormed outside, his fingers itching with desire to hit something — or someone. He
headed toward their carriage, but suddenly, the three chocolate desserts he had eaten today swirled up all at once. Letting out a choked sound, Ciel bent over, vomiting right onto the ground.

“My shoes!” he groaned as he saw ugly brown smudges staining his legs.

“Oh-oh,” Sebastian reached for him with a handkerchief, wiping his face with half-amused, half-annoyed expression. “It seems like I have neglected all of my duties today, Master. From now on, you will not get a dessert until you eat something substantial, and certainly no more than two servings per day.”

“I only asked you for the first one,” Ciel grumbled, grimacing as he looked at his shoes again. Noticing it, Sebastian crouched down with a sigh and began to clean his shoes with another handkerchief, and Ciel could almost hear the thoughts in his head.


When they returned to the London house, Ciel was so upset he felt sick with it. Darkness and misery, his oldest company, devoured each of his half-baked thoughts, not letting him get a grip and make a plan to redeem himself — if not in Sebastian’s eyes, then in his own.

He had been showing himself from his worst side today. He panicked like a child at the funeral parlour; he failed to find a murderer without the demon’s help; he vomited like a drunk who couldn’t hold his alcohol — only in Ciel’s case, it was chocolate.

And Sebastian had witnessed each and every of his humiliations. He might be already regretting forming a contract with him.

“Make me a dinner,” Ciel ordered, trying to keep his voice steady. “And after that, don’t bother me until the morning. I’ll be busy.”

“Of course,” Sebastian answered, lowering his head and not raising his eyes. Probably to hide the mockery in there.

Even more upset, Ciel went to the library, to the books about poisons that were waiting for him there.

They still had to know how and why that woman was poisoning her customers, and this time, Ciel would be the one to establish that. As his studies with Sebastian had shown, he was quite good a critical thinking, so figuring out the motive of the murderer shouldn’t be all that difficult.

Ciel spent the next five hours studying the books, seeking any mentions of Abrus precatorius and finding none. The clock had already struck midnight when he finally opened the book titled *Detective Footprints*, and to his astonishment, the first pages he looked at had the poison he was researching.

The heavy feeling of sleepiness melted into excitement, and Ciel pushed the book closer to his eyes, greedily studying the chapter. It took him a while to read the text and analyse what he was reading, but when he did, he jumped from his place, almost trembling with the need to go and do something.

For the poison to gain strength, the seeds had to be cracked and consumed. The cases described in the book mostly revolved around using Abrus precatorius to make a deadly weapon, but now, knowing about its properties, Ciel could easily imagine its effects in other forms as well. There
were sketches of those seeds in the book, meaning that he visually knew what he was looking for. All he had to do was search through that woman’s things.

Considering that she was poisoning her customers, she could store the seeds right at the café. In any case, it was worth checking. If he found the seeds there, he could call Scotland Yard officers and the case would be closed, and he would deserve at least a small part of the credit he would receive.

Carefully, Ciel crept out of the library, to where his coat was hanging. He didn’t know how good Sebastian’s hearing was, but as Ciel had asked him not to bother him until morning, he could hope that his walk would remain unnoticed — for some time at least.

A more rational part of him protested, whispering that he was making a mistake. Going by himself in the middle of the night, to a place belonging to a murderer… The whispers got so loud that Ciel stopped, hesitating, but the moment of weakness disappeared as quickly as it came. Snorting at his own cowardice, Ciel went to the kitchen first, looking through the knives he had there.

He would have to acquire a gun for such situations. For now, though, a simple knife would have to suffice.

The streets were empty and the air was so cold that it reminded Ciel of late autumn. Shivering, he wrapped the coat tighter around himself, looking around suspiciously.

He remembered where that café was. It wouldn’t take him long to get there.

Since Sebastian didn’t catch up with him to ask where he was going, Ciel relaxed, hoping that it would stay this way. He didn’t always need Sebastian’s protection. He could do such basic thing as searching through one’s things by himself.

As he’d expected, the café was silent and dark. Ciel stood motionlessly for several minutes, staring through the window and making sure that there was truly no movement inside. Then, he focused on the lock, examining it carefully and trying to figure out how to open it.

Well. Opening it was out of question. Breaking through the window, on the other hand…

Ciel was in luck — the window wasn’t closed properly. He hastened to slip inside, wincing when it was accompanied by a horrible, cracking noise. Sweet smells engulfed him, and while he would have found them mouth-watering recently, now the mere thought of chocolate and sugar made him nauseous.

Ciel moved to the kitchen, recalling the number of personnel he had seen here earlier today. Three people, including the murderer. Not much. There couldn’t be an abundance of personal things here, so it was possible that he would be done quickly.

Boxes. Shelves. Strange tubes. Vials. Ciel inspected everything attentively, without taking his gloves off, wanting to minimise any chance of contacting the poison himself. A small vial attracted his attention, one with the word ‘Chili’ written over it.

Chili? In a place that served desserts? Ridiculous.

Licking his lips in anticipation, Ciel opened the vial and nearly crowed in victory.

There they were. Small, reddish seeds, just like on the picture he had seen in his book.

Excellent.
Ciel put the vial back, thinking. As he finally decided and reached out to pocket his finding, something heavy landed on his head, instantly dimming the rest of the lights around him.

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When he came to his senses, his first thought was that he had imagined these two months. There was no Sebastian, no opportunity for revenge — he was still locked in his cage, destined to be touched against his will, slaughtered when his executioners decided it.

Terror crawled up his throat, blinding him through the burst of sheer, overwhelming panic, but the scream that was gathering itself on his tongue remained subdued. Blinking rapidly, Ciel realised he was gagged, sitting on the floor next to several other people — three men and one woman. They were all chained to one another, with Ciel stuck in the middle.

Now the memories returned, but confusion remained.

If he was dealing with a deranged woman who had decided to keep poisoning her customers, what were all these people doing here? Why were they all chained?

He had to call Sebastian. Ciel still wasn’t sure how the contract between them worked — technically, Sebastian was supposed to find him anywhere, but could he do that if Ciel failed to say his name? Could he sense him when Ciel was unconscious, or did he feel him only when he was in immediate danger?

Ciel jerked his hands, trying to free himself from the stinking piece of cloth pushed into his mouth, but the chain was too short, so he just growled in frustration.

“Don’t even try that, kid, it’s hopeless,” one of the men said, and Ciel glared at him. It was easy for him to talk — he wasn’t gagged like an animal.

The man must have interpreted his glare wrongly because he continued talking, as if Ciel encouraged him to converse.

“How did someone so little get tangled up in smuggling? I didn’t know Martha was accepting children to work for her. Though you are dressed nicely — perhaps you stole something from the passengers?”

Ciel let out an ambiguous sound, his mind working overtime.

Smuggling? What did smuggling have to do with poisoning?

“We should have waited,” a woman chained right next to him whispered, her voice heavy with regret. “It’s a new business, a new route, so of course the control is tighter. If we waited—”

“I told you to wait!” another man exclaimed. This one, on the contrary, was shaking with fury. “I told you, didn’t I? But none of you wanted to listen to me! They transport the poisons with one ship and the medicine with another. We had to focus on one of them, and only after the business had
With supreme effort, Ciel finally managed to get the cloth out of his mouth and coughed, disgusted, trying to get rid of the nauseous flavour.

“Explain,” he gritted out. “What medicine?”

He could feel the eyes of everyone on himself, which only added to his frustration.

“Well?” Ciel demanded.

“You are too bold for a child,” the woman noted, a small smile lighting her face. “How did you even get here?”

“I was investigating the cases of poisoning.”

A startled laughter was his answer.

“Oh, boy, you are really unlucky, aren’t you?” the man who had been shaking with anger asked, shaking his head in mirthless amusement. “Poisoning is just a tip of the iceberg. Martha and her people have found a way to smuggle stuff from Bengal. They decided to set up a sort of medical business — make people sick from herbs and seeds they smuggle from Bengal, and then sell them the herbs and seeds that would make them feel better. They have been studying plants of Bengal for years and they tested them on animals. The poisoned people weren’t supposed to die, it’s just Martha started to test the smuggled stuff on the customers from her dinning place and she failed to calculate the dosages of one of her poisons correctly.”

“She should have dropped that kind of poison,” the woman added. “I warned her but she became obsessed with making it work.”

“This is absurd,” Ciel scoffed. “Sooner or later, people would realise they started feeling badly only after visiting that café.”

“It was only one of many places,” the man explained. “Martha wasn’t supposed to attract attention but—”

“But she started to view a potential business as a playfield and got lost in her foolish ambitions. Pathetic,” Ciel concluded, the gears in his head turning rapidly.

This was much better than he’d thought. Now, he had a chance to expose a whole smuggling ring, not just find a single murderer. If the underworld of London heard about it, they would be forced to realise that despite his age, Ciel was someone to be taken seriously.

It was his way in. His way to establish a name for himself, to prove himself before the Queen and the underworld.

“What can a child like you understand?” another one of Ciel’s neighbours joined the conversation. “Martha’s business will bring her thousands! The entire underworld of London has respect for her now that she has found a new route for smuggling. The authorities have no idea about it, still — if you told us the truth, then they are only investigating the cases of poisoning. It just proves how brilliant Martha’s smuggling strategy is. Yes, there were some incidences, but in the end, it will prove to be beneficial for her. By fatal poisoning, she diverts attention from the real thing!”

“If you admire her so much, then what are you doing here?” Ciel asked coldly.
“They stole from me,” a new voice sounded, and Ciel’s head snapped in that direction. The same woman he and Sebastian had seen in the afternoon entered the room, followed by two tall men.

“Martha, I presume?” he asked, trying to appear calm. He felt no fear — without the gag, he could call for Sebastian at any second, and then everything would be over.

“I don’t know who you are,” the woman turned to him, narrowing her eyes. “Perhaps I should have let you touch the thing you have been trying to steal from me — I would have had a good laugh at how your small body convulsed in seizure. But fortunately for you, your end will be less painful. I have no time for games.”

“He’s dressed too well to be a thief,” one of the newcomers noted, but Martha shrugged indifferently.

“I found him in my kitchen, at night, after he had broken my window to get inside. I don’t care what he wears — he could have stolen these clothes. All thieves deserve only one end. Take them and get rid of them while it’s still dark”.

“Sebas…” Ciel started to call out, but one of the men moved with surprising speed, pushing the gag back into his mouth. Shocked, Ciel tried to spit it out, but all he managed to do was get another blow to his head. Moaning silently in pain, he closed his eyes, clinging to the shapes of consciousness that tried to slip away from him.

Dimly, he understood that he was being led up the stairs, to the cold, dark street. Someone was begging for something right into his ear; another person was crying, getting louder and louder. When all shapes around him finally gained form, Ciel realised he was still chained to those other people, and they were standing in front of the Thames, on a small hill.

They were going to be pushed from it? When still chained?

A new wave of terror flooded Ciel, larger and more intense than anything he had experienced today. Jerking in a futile attempt to free himself from the burden of other people, he groaned in distress, understanding the extent of his helplessness.

Sebastian. Sebastian had to come. Sebastian had to save him! Yes, Ciel hadn’t managed to utter his name in its entirety, but surely Sebastian could find him based on the contract? He couldn’t die like that, on a foolish case, the very first one that was assigned to him. He couldn’t die without completing his revenge. He couldn’t die without giving his soul to Sebastian.

‘It will serve that demon right if I die and it will turn out that he has served me all these months for free,’ Ciel thought darkly, and then all thoughts left his head as he was pushed right into the icy water, in a mess of limbs and cries of others. Someone’s leg crashed into his ribs, making him gasp, and his mouth was immediately filled with water.

Terrified, Ciel tried to move, but the chains were holding him tightly, and everything around him was plunging into thicker and thicker darkness. He was cold, and hurt, and scared, and there was absolutely nothing he could do.

As he jerked once again in his chains, he managed to see a pale face of a woman he had been talking to, twisted in horror and agony. Ciel turned away from her, resenting the fact that he was going to die like this, chained to smugglers and thieves he didn’t even know, all because he wanted to prove to Sebastian that he wasn’t helpless and useless. What an irony.

Ciel’s vision started to turn black. Eventually, the only sound he could hear was the thudding of his
own slowing pulse, and he closed his eyes, unwilling to accept this reality.

Everything changed suddenly. One moment he was drowning, going down, and down, and down, and the next, familiar hands grabbed him, tearing him from the trap of the chains effortlessly, as if they had been made from paper. Heavy locks were still binding Ciel’s hands together, but at least now, he wasn’t chained to others.

The second they reached the surface, Ciel was engulfed by a coughing, choking fit. He spat back the water, and then spat some again, and it seemed like his entire body consisted of it at this point because it kept coming and coming, stealing his ability to breathe. When he finally managed to inhale, his teeth were chattering and he was trembling so badly that he could barely see anything.

He could see Sebastian, though. Sebastian was sitting next to him, on the ground, staring at him with the eyes so crimson that Ciel felt lightheaded from both fear and relief. But no, not just from this — his consciousness was slipping again, and this time, he knew he wouldn’t wake any time soon, not after what he’d experienced.

He had to give Sebastian an order.

Save the drowning thieves, or secure a place for himself?

“Sebastian,” Ciel choked out, not recognising the hoarse sound as his voice. “This is… an order. Kill the men. Leave the woman alive. Go to the café before the police arrive — there is… a vial… ‘Chili’. Take the seeds. Put them into the woman’s pocket. We have to present… the evidence… if she doesn’t talk. The poison… her people might take it away before…”

For a brief second, Ciel could see something akin to admiration and surprise flare in Sebastian’s eyes, and despite his situation, he suddenly felt warm.

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian whispered, and there was such a deadly promise in his words that Ciel shivered, not sure if it was from cold or anticipation.

From his place, he saw Sebastian straighten and turn to Martha. Two of her men stepped forward, shielding her, but Ciel wasn’t interested in them. His eyes were glued to Sebastian. He opened his mouth to add that he wanted the thieves to be saved, but all he managed was a deep cough that almost tore his lungs out.

His vision was dimming, again, but Ciel still saw the shadows that separated from Sebastian as if they were living entities, gliding toward people in front of them. Several black feathers fell, and suddenly, the goal of Ciel’s life was to grab one of them. He rarely saw Sebastian in such form, and who knew if he would ever see him like this again.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed himself forward, crawling to the closest feather. He threw all his strength into these several movements, and when his fingers finally closed over it, securing it in his hand, all power left, plunging Ciel back into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I've been asked recently about my thoughts on Ciel and Sebastian's relationship in the anime, so if you are interested, here's the link) https://k-s-morgan.tumblr.com/post/175072871883/do-you-think-sebastian-and-ciel-care-about-
each I plan to focus on those specific moments extensively as the story goes on.
Chapter Notes

This is more of a filler chapter, with more focus on Ciel's feelings toward Sebastian and stuff that could have helped him establish useful connections to be able to perform his role as a Queen's Watchdog. I would love to jump into the events of the anime already, but we do need at least some setting :D I hope you'll enjoy it!

Ciel gained consciousness several times, blinking at his surroundings in a sleepy daze. Worry immediately began to gnaw at him, twisting his insides from the irrational fear of being abandoned, subsiding only when he saw Sebastian at his bed, and wasn’t it foolish? To think that the company of a demon was worth anything. But now, plunged into the pit of fever and pain that was buzzing in his very bones, Ciel clung to the illusion of his caretaker, watching him until his eyes closed and darkness claimed him again.

Once, as he woke up, Sebastian wasn’t there. Panic filled him instantly, crawling into his eyes, ears, nose, until Ciel was choking on it, terrified, confident that any second now, other people would come from the shadows — to hurt him, to take him away again, to kill him this time. Panting, Ciel jerked, not knowing what he was trying to do, and then his gaze fell on his own hand, where a dark feather was glistening. Despite being clutched tightly for however long, it didn’t look ruffled in the slightest — on the contrary, it looked fresh, and alive, and beautiful. So beautiful.

Ciel pulled it closer to his face, staring at it, enchanted, and his panic retreated, replaced by a wonderful sense of calm. Clumsily, he tried to stroke the feather with his fingers, but they refused to obey, so Ciel just pressed his fist to his chest and fell asleep again.

Through the thick fog, he could recall Sebastian making him sit and feeding him soup, slowly and carefully. Ciel didn’t remember the taste, but he did remember the feeling of infuriating, crushing helplessness.

And then Sebastian said something and tried to unclasp his hand. Upon seeing the feather, his eyebrows rose, and they continued to rise up, and up, and up, in what seemed like an endless motion. Ciel frowned and clenched his feather back, pulling it to himself protectively.

"Go away," he murmured, or tried to, as his voice was a terrible rasp. Sebastian frowned and Ciel closed his eyes again, unwilling to continue watching him. Why would he need a demon now that he had his feather?

He came to his senses from someone’s gentle touch. The hand that was caressing his forehead was not familiar and Ciel jumped in panic, trying to shake the stranger off. He stared at the figure in front of him, and slowly, it began to gain contours, turning into concerned Tanaka.

Tanaka. Where did he come from? The last time Ciel had seen him was… in the hospital…

His train of thoughts came to a halt when Tanaka reached for him again. For a second, his image blurred, turning into the shape of a masked man with an evil, crazed grin. Ciel screamed, his terror overcoming the pain from his sore throat, and when the hand froze before rushing to him again, he shrieked, “Sebastian! Sebastian! Sebas…”
His torn throat gave up, not letting any more sounds escape, and Ciel choked, terrified even more, suffocating, yet still trying to crawl away from the threat.

The foreign shape disappeared and another one came in its stead. A familiar gloved hand, bringing a cool, soothing touch, making Ciel relax into it immediately. He barely contained an embarrassing whimper of relief.

As his breathing stabilised, he risked opening his eyes again and saw Tanaka bowing to Sebastian respectfully before walking away, leaving them alone.

Sebastian turned to him, and his lips stretched in a strange, almost terrifying half-smile, half-smirk. There was smugness there, and satisfaction, and something else, something dark and dangerous and cruel. Ciel thought he saw fangs instead of the normal teeth, but he felt no fear — not even when Sebastian leaned over him, his eyes glistening with bright, deep redness. There was also an indulgent tenderness there, and Ciel smiled at the sight of it, comforted.

Now, where there was no one but Sebastian in his room, he closed his eyes easily, safe and content.

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His next awakening was accompanied by realisation that his fever was gone — along with his voice. No matter how hard Ciel tried, he couldn’t squeeze out a sound, and he didn’t know if he felt angry or humiliated because of this.

His memories were hazy. Dimly, he recalled Sebastian taking care of him — feeding him, bathing him… The feather.

Ciel’s eyes widened in embarrassed horror and he quickly examined his bed. The feather was lying next to his pillow, for everyone to see, and if he didn’t feel so weak, he would have blushed miserably.

Sebastian had definitely seen this. He would probably mock him for years now, and with a good reason.

Sighing, Ciel took the feather in his hand, examining it closely, admiring it despite his conflicting feelings.

It was truly beautiful. Enthralling. Such a glossy shade of profound black, with small flickers of red glittering through this complete darkness if the feather was subjected to the beams of light from the window.

And ridiculous or not, the sight of it still made him feel safe.

Ciel wasn’t going to say goodbye to it — he was already humiliated to the point of no return, so there couldn’t be any harm in keeping it. Even though he would still have to be careful and keep it a secret. Let Sebastian guess what he’d done with it.
As soon as Ciel hid the feather under the pillow, the door opened and Sebastian entered, carrying a tray with something.

“Good morning, Young Master,” he said. “I can see you are feeling better today.”

Ciel tried to answer before he remembered that he couldn’t. All he managed was a half-hearted glare.

Sebastian’s lips twitched before he lowered the tray and offered him a cup of tea.

“I apologise for the inadequate serving but I believe you shouldn’t leave the bed yet,” he uttered, and Ciel shrugged. He accepted the tea and his hands began to shake so badly that he nearly spilled it. Astonished, he watched how Sebastian managed to grab the cup from him, sighing as if he found the situation incredibly bothersome.

“I will do it for you, my lord,” he offered, lifting the cup to Ciel’s lips, but he stopped when Ciel sent him the most vicious glare he could manage. Without trying to speak, he took the cup back from Sebastian, and this time, he was ready to hold onto it. This time, he grabbed it tightly, with both hands, and while it still shook, there was no threat of spilling it now.

Satisfied, Ciel took a sip, careful to keep his face blank. The taste was absent, but he guessed it had to be because of his illness. His nose wasn’t working as it should have, and without it, he couldn’t sense even the basic flavour.

As he finished the tea and the oatmeal with fruits that Sebastian had brought to him, Ciel kept wondering how he could ask questions without using his voice. He craved to know what had happened to his case, if it was closed, if the Queen was satisfied with his efforts.

Sebastian could have realised this without being prompted, but he was either an idiot or pretending to be one.

At first, Ciel just stared at him intently. Sebastian tilted his head in a mocking wonder in response before asking, “Would Young Master like another serving of oatmeal?”

Ciel shook his head before making an inquisitive gesture. To his annoyance, Sebastian sent him an innocent smile.

“Another cup of tea, perhaps?”

‘Idiot,’ Ciel mouthed. ‘How is the case?’

Sebastian’s smile widened to a grin before he shook his head apologetically.

“I’m afraid I have no idea what you are trying to say, Master,” he announced mournfully.

Baring his teeth in a silent snarl, Ciel gestured, pointing to his head and mimicking the action of putting a crown on it. It was utterly undignified, and the idiotic demon still pretended he didn’t understand him.

“Would you like a pen and a piece of paper?” Sebastian offered. “You might write your concerns down and I will do my best to address them.”

Ciel nodded, fuming. When Sebastian returned with the paper and a pen, Ciel grabbed it… and hesitated.
Writing down his questions would be an easy way out. Knowing Sebastian and his penchant for games, he would definitely give the briefest answers to force Ciel to write more.

There had to be another solution. Not only for now, but for the future instances, when they would have to communicate without others understanding them. Why not use all the potential of the current situation?

Ciel knew what Sebastian expected him to write, so he took pleasure in writing the opposite.

‘Bring me a book with the alphabet and another piece of paper.’

Ciel drank in the expression of pure surprise on Sebastian’s face and smiled smugly as his demon stared at him, intrigued.

“A book with the alphabet?” he clarified, sounding bemused. Ciel narrowed his eyes, trying to convey the ‘Do you want me to repeat my orders?’ message, and this time, Sebastian seemed to understand.

“Right away, my lord,” he said.

When Ciel got what he had asked for, he started working immediately, analysing the letters and then staring at the blank piece of paper before him. Sebastian remained in the room with him, and even without turning, Ciel knew he was being watched. Apparently, his behaviour intrigued Sebastian enough to remain with him and see what he was going to do.

More than satisfied, Ciel chose to ignore him, focusing on his task instead.

He had heard discussions about the Morse code, a way of sharing messages by special clicks, without speaking. Ciel didn’t know how to use it and whether there were books that could teach him, but in the end, it didn’t matter. What he liked was the idea of a special language that only selected people could understand.

It would be even better if he and Sebastian had a language of their own, which no other living being could decipher. If they could talk non-verbally, through a system of, say, knocks and touches…

Ciel found the idea so fascinating that he got entirely absorbed, not seeing anything but the letters and signs that he himself was coming up with. He didn’t know how much time had passed, but at some point, Sebastian interrupted him.

“Young Master, may I ask, what are you doing?”

Ciel frowned, displeased at having been distracted. How did Sebastian expect him to answer, anyway? Especially as he had failed to understand the most basic things Ciel had been trying to convey earlier?

He made a dismissive motion in response, watching how Sebastian stepped closer after it, as if now, he was even more curious.

“Are you drawing pictures?” he drawled, and Ciel rolled his eyes, not even insulted by this pathetic attempt at mockery.

Seeing that he wasn’t going to get an answer, Sebastian evidently chose to change his tactic.

“Maybe I could assist you,” he noted, and Ciel snorted, glancing at him in disdain. As if he needed
anyone’s help with this.

On the other hand, if this new language was for him and Sebastian, then perhaps Sebastian could take part in helping him devise it. If they were both to contribute, it would help them to get used to it sooner.

Taking another piece of paper, Ciel began to write. When Sebastian read his note, his eyes lit up with even brighter curiosity, and he leaned over Ciel’s work, studying it.

“Interesting,” he uttered finally. “I have never witnessed a creation of a new language before. Do you wish for each letter to have one specific sign?”

‘It would help us to converse faster,’ Ciel mouthed, and was satisfied when Sebastian nodded, easily understanding him now that he himself was interested in what they were doing.

“Would you allow me to assist, Master?” he asked, and Ciel nodded graciously, nodding at the bed to signify that Sebastian could sit down as well.

His afternoon was looking to be promising, which was a blessing, after all time he had already wasted.

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Naturally, it took them far more than one afternoon to finish devising their system of signs. In two days, Ciel started to get out of bed on his own, and after countless hot draughts that Sebastian kept pouring into him, his voice began to return.

“Tell me what happened with the case,” he ordered as soon as he could, and Sebastian smirked, holding his gaze and undoubtedly enjoying the pause. To make him wait even more? Honestly…

“It was solved in a manner that I believe you will find satisfying,” Sebastian said finally. “The woman, Martha Collins, confessed after the Scotland Yard officers found the vial with poison in her pocket — that vial that you asked me to bring from her kitchen. The smuggling ring has been dismantled, many more people have been arrested. The Queen,” Sebastian’s lips curled slightly, “is very satisfied with your work. She wishes you a ‘speedy recovery’.”

“You could have told me that sooner,” Ciel scowled and winced when his throat protested.

“You did not ask and I did not consider this information crucial enough to share it,” Sebastian said, and Ciel’s palm itched with an already familiar desire to slap him.

Sebastian was mocking him — again. Of that, he had no doubts. Out of everyone, why did he have to be stuck with such a provoking demon? Or were they all like this?

“In the future, you will share every piece of information about the case we are investigating the moment you receive it,” Ciel said coolly. “Is that clear?”

“Yes, Master,” Sebastian bowed.
Ciel ignored him after that, focusing on learning the signs they had already completed. He could feel the dark feather burning through the pillow, but he refused to even look in that direction.

He would hide it in his office once he felt well enough.

“Did the people who were chained with me die?” he asked. Sebastian nodded.

“Their bodies were found later that day,” he said. “Did the Young Master want them to be saved?” Annoyed at how Sebastian always managed to guess his thoughts, Ciel shrugged.

“They could be valuable witnesses,” he murmured.

“Are you sure it is the only reason?” Sebastian’s tone became silky, and Ciel immediately recognised the soft, dangerous notes he had heard when Sebastian had been trying to trick him into breaking the contract. “Those people could have lived a long life — in prison, perhaps, but after the icy waters of Thames, they would certainly appreciate it. They would be grateful to you.”

“What are you getting at?” Ciel snapped. “Do you expect me to care for some people I didn’t know? I spoke to them for about five minutes. I don’t approve of wasteful deaths, but at that moment, giving you instructions about the leader of the group was more important. I don’t regret the choice I’ve made. As for them being grateful and thus useful… I do need connections in the underworld but I will not use the lowest of the low. I will find worthier informants.”

If this was another test, Ciel seemed to have passed it. He couldn’t tell how he knew, but in all this time, he learned to recognise the signs of Sebastian being pleased. Whether it was the changing shade of his eyes, the barely noticeable uplifting of his lips, the slight twists of his facial muscles — Ciel didn’t know, but he knew it was there.

And it warmed his heart, despite the irritation he felt at being constantly tested.

“About the informants,” he added. “I want you to explore the underworld and most influential people within it. Find someone trustworthy — someone who still has a semblance of moral principles. We will make a contact with him or her.”

“Would you like me to both find an informant and make sure you have their loyalty?”

“When I said ‘we’, I meant exactly that,” Ciel corrected him. “You will find a person and I will meet with him or her. I cannot have their respect if you do all the work for me. I will participate.”

“As you wish,” Sebastian tilted his head, watching him attentively, and at that moment, Ciel would have given a lot to know what he was thinking.

Not that he cared all that much. But still.

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Lau was a tall Chinese man who kept holding a smaller dark-haired girl, Ran-Mao, in front of him
as if she were a shield. Ciel studied him carefully, recalling the description Sebastian had given to him earlier.

*Calm. Smart. Perceptive. Holding quite a big chunk of the underworld, being the top official of one of Chinese syndicates and the British branch manager of an influential trading company. Prone to violence, but reasonable, willing to negotiate.*

Ciel liked the description. And he trusted Sebastian — in this, at least.

Now, with Sebastian standing behind him as a shadow, Ciel felt safe physically, but worry still crawled under his skin, as it had been doing since morning.

He had to produce an appropriate impression during this meeting. He had to show to this Lau that despite his age, he was to be taken seriously.

And he had to show to Sebastian that he was capable of doing something like this.

Realising that the pause was getting too long, Ciel raised his head, staring at Lau directly.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked, keeping his voice cold. Lau hummed thoughtfully.

“I didn’t know who you were when your butler requested a meeting,” he uttered. “Now, seeing you in person, I can guess. The new Earl of Phantomhive, are you? You’ve caused quite a stir in our circles, after exposing the new smuggling ring. It took even me by surprise. I’m curious, what gave it away?”

“I hope you do not actually expect me to answer,” Ciel drawled. His heart was still beating wildly, but now, once engaged in conversation, he could feel his fear leaving him, replaced by a slow, steady swell of excitement.

He felt confident now that he was leading the conversation. He felt strangely at ease.

“Wouldn’t hurt to ask since…” Lau started, but Ciel cut him off sharply.

“Enough. I came to warn you — and to make you an offer. I know everything about your business, both legal and illegal kinds. I know about your opium dens, each of them. You try to stay clean and to divert suspicions but I have enough evidence to have you immediately deported from the country.”

Ran-Mao tensed, and Ciel felt Sebastian shift behind his back, stepping closer to him. Lau’s face remained blank — his eyes travelled from Ciel to Sebastian and then back to Ciel. A small smile graced his lips then before he nodded, as if urging Ciel to continue.

“I am inclined to allow you to continue your business in the underworld without notifying the authorities,” Ciel said, hoping that he was still on the right track. “Furthermore, I will help you to expand your business by entrusting some of specific areas to you. Currently, I am not satisfied with —” Ciel paused, frantically recalling the notes he had made after Sebastian’s report. The underworld of England intimidated him with its size and its potential, and it took him ages to remember all districts and people controlling them.

He couldn’t forget them now. He couldn’t let himself be humiliated like this.

Panic made his pulse race, and then Sebastian touched the back of his shoulder, making his muscles relax automatically. The touch was so light, it was barely there, yet suddenly, Ciel remembered the names he needed with absolute clarity.
“…black market docks and East End,” he continued, pretending that the pause had been deliberate. “The control over the Oriental Quarter also fills me with doubts. I am planning to eliminate the people who lead them and I would be willing to leave the administration over them to you under certain conditions. Are you interested in hearing them?”

There was a pause again, with Lau regarding him thoughtfully. Something like interest glimmered in his eyes when he muttered, “Do go on, Earl. I am more than ready to hear your offer.”

“You are to report to me directly about everything related to crucial underworld dealings,” Ciel said immediately. Sebastian shifted slightly behind him and Ciel added, “If I am not available, you are to report to my butler, Sebastian Michaelis. You are to follow my orders, whatever they are, and you are not to hide the information that I require. You are to make sure that the news about the return of Earl of Phantomhive reach even the farthest corners of the underworld, and that people planning to cross me think twice of it before acting. Is that clear?”

Ran-Mao tensed even more, and for a second, Ciel thought that he had pushed too far. He wasn’t sure if his tone and his behaviour were appropriate — he acted on instinct, and if he broke some unspoken rules…

But Lau blinked, caressing Ran-Mao’s back gently, and the tension subsided.

“Normally, I would ask for some time for consideration,” Lau uttered, smiling serenely. “But I believe I won’t need it here. I accept your offer, Earl. I think you and I… and your butler… will have a rather fruitful cooperation.”

Relief and joy that swirled inside Ciel’s chest almost made him stagger, but he managed to control himself and simply nodded.

“I am glad to hear that,” he said haughtily. “Yet you still have to earn my trust. I will be watching you. Never forget it. If you attempt to lie to me, I will know, and there will be consequences.”

“I’ll be looking forward to your instructions, Earl,” Lau said, closing his eyes.

He didn’t open them even as Ciel told Sebastian they were leaving, even as they actually turned to leave. Ran-Mao, on the other hand, refused to take her eyes off them — Ciel felt her gaze until he and Sebastian walked out of the door.

There, he finally allowed himself to relax, breathing in the moist air greedily.

“Do you think it went well?” he asked without looking at Sebastian, even though the question that was rolling on the tip of his tongue was, ‘Do you think I did well?’ Sebastian’s praise was a rare thing. During months of having him for a teacher, Ciel started to crave it — unconsciously at first, but now, even after catching himself on it, he couldn’t stop.

He wanted it. He wanted to know what Sebastian thought about him, about his efforts, about the results he’d achieved.

He would never let himself disclose these foolish desires, though. Not after what happened.

“It went better than I thought it would,” Sebastian said after a short deliberation, and Ciel squared his shoulders, happy to hear it. “Young Master has shown himself from his best sides. I would advise against trusting Lau until he proves himself but you clearly understand it yourself, considering what you said to him.”

“Of course I do,” Ciel huffed, ducking to hide a smile.
Everything was happening exactly by his plan — even better. He had established the connection with the underworld, he had pleased the Queen, proving that he was worthy of his family’s name, and he and Sebastian had prepared their special language to communicate secretly.

Who knew what else they would manage to achieve? Ciel wasn’t stupid, not anymore — he knew that what he was experiencing now was worthless. Yet for one short moment, he allowed himself to revel in the deceptive feeling of omnipotence, basking in Sebastian’s inherent presence.
Thank you all so much for your wonderful comments, kudos, and bookmarks - I'm so pleased that you are enjoying the story! This chapter echoes a moment from E2 of S1. More about it in the end notes)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cinnamon and orange. Cinnamon and peppermint. Lemon and… raspberry?

Yes. Raspberry.

This could work.

“Seba…” Ciel started and stopped when Sebastian materialised right in front of him, even before he finished uttering his name.

How did he manage to move like this? Ciel hated being taken aback — and he hated when his orders were ignored.

“I told you to use the door,” he said darkly. “I don’t want you to just appear out of nowhere. What if someone sees you?”

“I would know if you had company, Young Master,” Sebastian assured him, his lips stretching in a fake smile. “However, if it pleases you, I will only use the door from now on.”

“Make sure you do. Unless there is an emergency,” Ciel added. Sebastian liked twisting his orders too much, so he couldn’t be trusted. “I have another order for you. Go and make candies — some with cinnamon and orange, some with cinnamon and peppermint, and some with lemon and raspberry. I’ll need them within the next several hours.”

The expression of indignant astonishment on Sebastian’s face was so clear that Ciel lowered his head, hiding the beginning of a smile.

“I apologise, Young Master, but I cannot allow you to consume this many sweets,” Sebastian said finally. “We have already discussed it. You feel sick after—”

“Yes, I know. I am not a child,” Ciel growled, looking up again. Who did Sebastian take him for? After that last embarrassment, Ciel would never dine on candies or pastries again. And why would a demon watch his sugar intake in the first place? The mere notion was ridiculous.

“I’m not going to eat them all,” Ciel explained. “But I want to create some special recipes for Funtom Corporation. The company is basically useless now because my f… predecessor didn’t have time to develop it. It is very new and currently, practically no one is aware of it. I want to change that.”

“You believe you will be able to run a company?” Sebastian asked, his eyebrows rising. “I won’t pretend to know how it works, but you will have to do more than make up recipes and taste sweets that I make — surely you understand it?”
Ciel slammed his hand against the table, glaring. An ugly, vicious feeling twisted his insides at the sound of Sebastian’s condescending tone and the words he had spoken, at the lack of respect they implied.

It seemed like Sebastian still refused to take him seriously.

Fine. They would see what he had to say in several months.

“You are right — you don’t know how it works,” Ciel sneered. “But I do. And what I do not know, I will learn. Funtom Corporation will become known and it will bring me profits. I will use your help in certain matters, so I suggest you learn what you can about operating a business like this.”

“As you wish, my lord,” Sebastian bowed without enthusiasm. “Would you like me to accelerate the process? I could ensure that Funtom Corporation is at the top of—”

“Sebastian,” Ciel said slowly, satisfied with the steely notes that entered his voice. He leaned against his chair, studying Sebastian with as much coldness as he could produce. “What did I tell you about doing everything in a normal, human way? Is your memory so full of holes that you need me to repeat my orders several times until you remember them?”

Sebastian’s jaw clenched, but that was the only evidence of his displeasure. He bowed his head again in a silent apology, and Ciel relaxed.

“You and I will work,” he said curtly. “And we will work hard. I won’t have anyone saying that I am not the one responsible for my success — not even you. You will help me because you are my servant, but I will be the one to give you orders and to control and organise everything. Are we clear on that?”

“Yes, Master,” this time, when Sebastian looked at him, Ciel could see the first flickers of interest in his eyes. Despite his penchant for overusing his powers, Sebastian seemed to delight in working to achieve results. If Ciel could get him to become genuinely interested in Funtom Corporation, its success would be even larger than he had estimated initially because whether or not he wanted to admit it, he needed Sebastian’s assistance. He needed his insight and his advice, but he would never ask for anything if he felt that Sebastian waited, anticipated him to fail.

Sebastian’s genuine investment was obligatory and Ciel would achieve it by any means necessary, even if he had to manipulate him.

In all these months, he started to learn how to do that without it being noticed. For a supposedly ancient demon, Sebastian could be surprisingly malleable — all Ciel had to do was to make some task seem especially shiny and interesting, and Sebastian focused on it with intensity of children fixated on a new toy.

It was almost funny.

“Well, why are you standing here?” Ciel asked. “I told you what candies to make. We will try with these three flavours and I will pick which version we will be producing first.”

“I will start immediately,” Sebastian assured him, and then his face became blank again, so quickly that Ciel was confounded by such a sudden change. “However,” Sebastian said after a pause, “there is something I must inform you of first. Lau has sent you a letter. Apparently, someone in the underworld is dissatisfied with your decision to continue with your family’s responsibilities. A hired killer has been dispatched to eliminate you. According to Lau, he or she will contact you and use an excuse to get into your house, and that person won’t look immediately suspicious.”
“Everyone is suspicious to me,” Ciel said, eyeing Sebastian uncertainly. Someone hired an actual assassin to kill him? He did get his share of attackers — bandits, kidnappers, even burglars who thought that his house was empty… but someone professional enough to want to strike a conversation and get an invitation to his house? That was unusual.

That was scarier.

Ciel hunched his shoulders, frowning, feeling strangely intimidated.

He had just started his work in the underworld — and someone already wanted to kill him for that? If it weren’t for Lau…

“Young Master?” Sebastian’s voice tore him from his thoughts. Ciel glanced at him. Sebastian looked concerned — he even stepped closer, as if already prepared to shield him from the threat, and Ciel relaxed, instantly at ease.

He wasn’t scared of anything — not with Sebastian by his side. With what he was doing, he was bound to have enemies. The more time would pass, the bigger their number would be. And if he couldn’t help it… then he would make sure that his name was known by everyone in the underworld — known and feared.

“I can try to find out the identity of the killer before they make contact with you,” Sebastian offered, still watching him attentively, and Ciel shook his head.

“No,” he said. Now that he’d made the decision, his body began to vibrate in excited anticipation.

“We will play a game, Sebastian. We will prepare something very special for our guest.”

“A game, my lord?” undisguised surprise in Sebastian’s voice made Ciel’s grin widen.

“Oh, yes,” he murmured, the gears in his mind turning already, one idea replacing the other. “If this killer differs from those idiots that come after me occasionally, then he or she might prove to be a worthier challenge. We could organise a whole performance — for instance, you might play the role of a witless old man whose biggest concern is the quality of the tea…”

“Old man?” Sebastian repeated, and he sounded so offended that for a second Ciel fell silent, taken aback by a rush of strange endearment that coursed through him.

What a ridiculous demon he had.

“I didn’t mean it literally,” he explained, rolling his eyes to show Sebastian just what he thought of his silliness. “But you will produce an impression of a useless, slow butler. I, on the other hand, will behave just the way this person must expect me to. We could…” Ciel thought about it for a moment. “We could set some goals. For example, I might try to play an idiot and make this killer follow me to the basement. It will be easier to get rid of them there — less noise and a smaller mess to clean afterwards.”

“They won’t go there,” Sebastian noted. “No one in the underworld is entirely sure of what to expect from you, so regardless of your age, this killer will be cautious. They won’t go to a place that looks like a trap, so basement might not be the best choice.”

“Cautious or not, they will also be eager to finish their task early. The basement could look like a good opportunity for that.”

“No one could possibly fall for such an obvious ploy.”
“Want to bet?” Ciel smirked, and finally, Sebastian’s eyes lit up with the same anticipation he himself was feeling.

“So you are indeed turning this into a game,” Sebastian drawled thoughtfully. “Very well, Young Master. You prepare your part of performance and I, with your permission, will prepare mine.”

“Oh?” Ciel peeked at him curiously. “Do you have something in mind?”

Sebastian’s lips curled in a small, mysterious smile.

“I most certainly do,” he said.

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They didn’t have to wait long. In two days, Ciel received a letter from someone calling himself Benjamin Rassford, claiming he was interested in sponsoring Funtom Corporation and offering to discuss it during his visit.

Ciel had to admit he was surprised. He had just started working on Funtom Corporation, so how this man could know about it already was a mystery. Nevertheless, he gave a perfectly polite and semi-enthusiastic reply, arranging a meeting — and then finalising his plans with Sebastian.

The depth of his own excitement worried Ciel. Logically, he thought he shouldn’t look forward to something like this — he wasn’t particularly fond of the massacre Sebastian was engaging in from time to time, when the intruders came. Now, though, when he was also participating, he couldn’t deny the allure. The sense of power that was filling him at the mere thought of tricking the murderer and seeing shock and confusion in his eyes as life bled away from him.

Ciel had been a witness to this in that longest, coldest month of his life, when he had first met Sebastian.

He wondered if participating in demise of Benjamin Rassford would feel as satisfying.

Reading Sebastian was difficult, but if he had to, Ciel would say that his butler was also excited. The idea of turning murder into a game seemed to delight him — or maybe there was something else, too, because the way he kept watching Ciel was… strange. Sebastian’s eyes were both contemplative and sinister, and while Ciel refused to feel unease, worry still gnawed at him, whispering that Sebastian was planning something. Something he wouldn’t share with him even if Ciel tried to ask.

It made the time of his studies even more excruciating.

“Wrong,” Sebastian snapped, sending him a narrow-eyed look. “This is the third mistake you have made today. This is unacceptable. Your hands, please.”

Ciel glared at him before obeying, grimacing even before the sharp sting of pain burned through his palms.
It’s not that he disliked French, or Sebastian’s manner of teaching. Sebastian was a good teacher — in these months, he managed to teach him more than Ciel had learned in the previous years. There was also something vaguely fascinating in how Sebastian transformed as he took the role of a teacher, how his voice deepened, became colder and demanding. Ciel felt almost compelled to do good, and even if his instinct to obey was concerning, he knew it was for the best. He did have a lot to learn, and Sebastian’s approach was definitely working.

Learning French was obligatory. Ciel could imagine how many opportunities would open for him once he was able to communicate in it flawlessly, but today, his thoughts were far from his lesson. He wanted the game to start.

He wanted to know what Sebastian was planning.

Glancing at the clock carefully, Ciel tried to focus on the letters in front of him, recalling everything he knew about French subjunctive.

Je veux que vous dansez, he wrote, then stopped, frowning.

He wasn’t sure how to translate the rest of the sentence. He wasn’t sure that what he’d written was correct in the first place.

…If he was right and Sebastian was planning something that he didn’t wish to discuss with him, then it was most likely something concerning him directly. Something against him. Otherwise, why would Sebastian keep it a mystery?

He was plotting. Sometimes Ciel thought that he was always plotting something, and that one day, he would wake up and Sebastian wouldn’t obey him at all. That he would just grin at him, slowly and darkly, before breaking every bone in his body, smiling wider at his screams, finally forcefully taking his soul while he was still in agony.

Shuddering, Ciel finished his translation and pushed the piece of paper to Sebastian. Sebastian took it, examining the lines, his eyebrows furrowing in frustration.

“Wrong,” he said shortly. “Your concentration is abysmal today. Hands open.”

Oh.

That was going to hurt. His hands were already burning after all strikes he had received within the last hour — adding more would probably feel hellish.

But it was nothing in comparison to the pain that had been inflicted on him before.

Ciel Phantomhive wasn’t scared of physical pain. Not anymore.

Clenching his jaw, Ciel held out his hands, staring at Sebastian’s pointer grimly. He hated being hit with this thing. Pity that Sebastian seemed to have grown fond of it lately.

A pause stretched, and when nothing happened, Ciel looked up in surprise.

Sebastian was frowning, staring at his hands. They were shaking slightly, protesting against the treatment they’d been receiving, and Ciel glowered at them before glancing at Sebastian again.

“Well?” he asked impatiently. “I don’t have all day.”

Sebastian hesitated. His frown deepened and a shadow of confusion flickered across his face before
he schooled it.

“That’s enough for today,” he said finally. “We will continue the day after tomorrow. However, I expect you to translate the first story from here until then,” Sebastian dropped a book in front of him and Ciel stared at him, torn between annoyance and surprise.

What had come over Sebastian? He had never refrained from punishing him before, when Ciel deserved it. And he certainly deserved it now.

On the other hand, Sebastian’s punishments were never quite as painful as today — because Ciel rarely deserved to be hit so many times in a row.

Collecting his things, Ciel risked a quick glance in Sebastian’s direction. He was no longer frowning but he was still looking at Ciel’s hands, the air around him faintly displeased.

Did Sebastian not like seeing him in physical pain?

Interesting.

Wanting to test his theory, Ciel cradled one of his hands to his chest, cringing inwardly from embarrassment. It was awkward. Unbecoming. Pathe…

All thoughts faded when Sebastian approached him in several quick steps and took his hand, examining it, the frown returning to his face.

“I will bring some ice for it,” he said.

Ciel stared after him long since Sebastian disappeared, his mouth hanging open.

He was shocked. His hands didn’t hurt badly enough to warrant ice treatment, but if Sebastian wanted to do it, Ciel wasn’t going to stop him — he would gladly observe this strangeness while it lasted.

He was pleased. For Sebastian to be bothered by something as insignificant, to refuse to hit him again because he thought it was too much…

Yes, Ciel was pleased.

Perhaps too pleased.

Dangerously so.

***

“Earl Phantomhive, I presume? It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Benjamin Rassford was a tall, middle-aged man with a smile that emanated friendliness — a very fake kind of it.
Ciel nodded, offering his hand and trying to appear flustered. Sebastian was standing behind Rassford — a dark, comforting shadow, and a brief look at him revealed that he was entirely focused on his task. His eyes were fixed on Rassford’s back, tracking his slightest movements, and while he appeared relaxed, Ciel knew that this would change instantly if Rassford were to suddenly attack him.

Despite all his flaws, Sebastian was protective of him. Even if it was his soul that he cared about, not Ciel himself, it still sent wave after wave of warmth through Ciel’s body.

Shaking his head to clear it from unwanted thoughts, Ciel smiled at Rassford and gushed, “I was so happy to receive your letter! I was just planning to look for sponsors for my company. I thought it would take me at least several months, but then you contacted me with your offer… How did you know about Funtom Corporation — it’s not even popular, not at the moment? What offer are you considering? I would like to have—”

“Young Master,” Sebastian interrupted him gently, throwing an apologetic look at Rassford. “You shouldn’t keep your guest here.”

“Oh… right,” Ciel bit his lower lip in fake embarrassment, rubbing his hands so nervously that he almost giggled at the terrible awkwardness of it all.

Rassford, the fool he was, relaxed, smiling indulgently.

“It is fine,” he assured. “I understand it must be difficult for you to get used to your new responsibilities — after all, you are still a child.”

And you are a dead man still walking, Ciel thought before letting his shoulders slump.

“Yes,” he murmured. “I apologise for my manners. Sometimes I let the excitement get the best of me. It’s just your offer… my company… that is…” Ciel blushed, hanging his head. He glanced at Sebastian from under his lashes to check his reaction, and Sebastian raised his eyebrows in obvious amusement, looking surprised and… impressed?

Satisfied, Ciel looked at him openly now, pouring all helplessness and vulnerability into his gaze and making sure Rassford witnessed it.

Some strange emotion crossed Sebastian’s face, but in the next second, he stepped forward, playing the courteous, embarrassed butler.

“Please follow me,” he said, moving towards the living room. “I will serve tea and you will be able to discuss your offer with Young Master, Mr. Rassford.”

“Of course,” Rassford said smoothly. He clearly dismissed Ciel as unworthy and fixed his gaze on Sebastian, probably determining whether or not he posed any threat.

So far, everything was going according to their plan. Rassford was bound to be suspicious, having heard about Ciel’s success with locating and dismantling the new smuggling ring and wondering if he had been lucky or dangerous. Now, as he discarded the latter idea, it was only logical to focus on Sebastian, Ciel’s right hand, wondering if he was the one behind their successful mission.

As the tea was served and their discussion started, Ciel could see that the last pieces of Rassford’s suspicions were dissolving. His look lost its sharpness and he started to speak almost lazily, watching Sebastian with obvious contempt.

Ciel found it strangely irritating but he hid it well, smiling with and without reason, pretending to
be an overexcited child whose life-goal was to produce as many sweets as humanly possible — and then eat them all.

Sebastian was also excellent in his role. His movements were much slower than usual, which made him look harmless and almost clumsy at times. He hovered over Rassford and Ciel with a worried expression, asking again and again if they needed something, as if concerned about the outcome of their negotiations more that Ciel pretended to be himself, wanting everything to be perfect and failing in the process.

The second-rate butler of a spoiled child. Just what they had decided to portray.

“Sebastian, leave us alone!” Ciel snapped finally. He was getting bored with this meaningless conversation — it was time for the next step. Time to prove that he could trick Rassford into following him to the basement — the basement that he would never get to leave. “Go and make some more sweets. And dinner, too. I am perfectly capable of having a conversation without your assistance! Mr. Rassford and I will make a deal as it is. Right, Mr. Rassford?” Ciel stared at his clueless guest hopefully and was rewarded by a condescending smirk.

“Yes, I don’t doubt we will reach an agreement soon,” Rassford said. Beaming, Ciel turned to Sebastian.

“Leave,” he ordered. “And don’t bother us, not until I call for you. Understood?”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian bowed, a flawless picture of devotion, before walking out of the room.

Ciel stretched in his place, yawning and then quickly covering his mouth with his hand.

“Apologies,” he murmured. “So… where were we?”

“You were going to tell me about the new flavours you have developed,” Rassford said, his eyes flickering to the door where Sebastian disappeared, probably making sure he had indeed left.

“Oh, yes!” Ciel perked up. “Why don’t you taste some for yourself? I have an entire collection that you could choose from!”

“Indeed?” Rassford looked interested. “Where is that?”

“Follow me,” Ciel jumped from his chair and moved to the door. Opening it, he let Rassford come first. It earned him a confused expression, so Ciel started chatting immediately, hoping to distract Rassford from his mistake.

He couldn’t allow himself to turn his back to a killer. Sebastian was powerful, but if Rassford moved quickly and abruptly enough, who knew what might happen. Now, at least, Ciel could watch him, and if he saw Rassford’s hands move, he’d know what it meant.

And he would call Sebastian.

“Here,” he said finally, stopping next to the brown door.


“Sebastian said that I couldn’t eat them all and that we had to keep them away from light for the time being. Which ones would you like to try first? With orange or with mint? Or chocolate and strawberry ones?”
This time, Ciel did turn his back to Rassford, coming down the stairs slowly. The basement was mostly dark — the only source of light was a small window, and Ciel moved toward it, counting in his head.

Two.

Four.

Six.

When he reached eight, the door above him closed, and he grinned in triumph before turning to Rassford.

“Why did you close the door?” he asked innocently and gasped when he saw a gun pointed at him.

“I had a more elaborate scheme in mind but you have made my job easier,” Rassford said, smirking arrogantly. “You don’t have a lot of servants, do you, little Earl? With your butler away and us locked here, no one will hear the gunshot. I might even keep this identity — I’ll just return to your living room and pretend that you have gone to the basement by yourself, with someone already waiting for you there.”

“That would be a very weak alibi,” Ciel noted, suddenly bored. He had done what he and Sebastian had bet on — he’d brought this idiot here. Now it was time to end the game. “Scotland Yard would check your background and realise immediately that you are in no position to support me financially. Your excuse to get into my house would be ruined and you would become a primary suspect.”

“What?” Rassford gaped at him, so flabbergasted that Ciel couldn’t fight his own smirk.

“Please,” he scoffed. “Did you really think a fool that I pretended to be would be able to solve a case? It would take—”

He didn’t finish because a choked sound interrupted him, coming from one of the dark corners. Frowning, Ciel glanced there.

Sebastian stumbled forward, looking so terrified that for a second, Ciel actually became concerned.

“Please, don’t hurt the Young Master,” Sebastian said, staring at Rassford. “He is just a child. It is not his fault that the Queen forces him to do her bidding.”

Ciel bristled, clenching his fists in a burst of genuine anger. Game or not, Sebastian had to watch his tongue. This was taking it too far.

“What are you doing here?” Rassford asked, perplexed. “You were supposed to be in the kitchen.”

“I had to pick some ingredients from here,” Sebastian said, his voice trembling, and Ciel didn’t know if he felt amused or disturbed.

He didn’t like hearing fear in Sebastian’s voice. It made him uneasy, filling him with tension and anxiety he despised.

There was no point in pretending any longer. What was Sebastian doing?

“Young Master never wanted to be the Queen’s Watchdog,” Sebastian continued. “If you leave now, we won’t tell anyone.”
Ciel snorted and Rassford echoed it.

“Sorry, butler,” he said coldly. “Your Master’s time is up. I didn’t want to kill you, it wasn’t my task, but seems like you happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Anyway, I thought you would be pleased if you didn’t have to deal with such an annoying brat all the time.”

“He is my Master,” Sebastian said softly and Rassford laughed.

“Not anymore,” he uttered before aiming the gun at Ciel. His finger pressed against the trigger when Sebastian exclaimed “No!” and jumped in front of Ciel, right when the gunshot went off.

Ciel couldn’t see whether the bullet had hit him or not. It couldn’t – surely Sebastian wasn’t stupid enough to dive in front of a bullet like that. He had probably caught it, or had managed to break Rassford’s gun, or…

But Sebastian staggered, letting out a terrible noise. Then he collapsed and Ciel stared at him wide-eyed.

His heart stopped. There were no other words to describe it. Suddenly, he was full of nauseating bile — it burned through him, sending a thick wave of vomit to his throat, and the need to spew it became so unbearable that Ciel pressed his hands against his mouth, choking.

“Se… Sebastian,” he whispered. His voice shook. His hands shook. His legs shook as well, threatening to buckle under him.

He didn’t notice how he dropped to his knees, reaching out to touch Sebastian’s chest and recoiling when his hand collided with something warm and sticky.

Blood. Sebastian was bleeding.

Ciel had never seen him bleed — not like this. Sebastian had dealt with countless intruders but he had never, never been hurt. He was a demon — he was faster, stronger, more powerful. How could a simple gun reduce him to such a state?

“Sebastian!” Ciel called harshly. “Get up! Sebastian!”


His breath hitched, and Ciel touched Sebastian again, disregarding blood this time.

He couldn’t get a grip on his thoughts. He couldn’t even begin to set them in order and make any semblance of plan. Dimly, he remembered Rassford and his gun, but his self-preservation instincts didn’t kick in. All Ciel could see was Sebastian, bleeding, dead, and terrible emptiness that gripped him reminded him of December.

His parents, dead. His servants, even his dog — everyone frozen; shells, not people.

Days in captivity. Children around him — tortured and killed, one by one, day after day.

Loneliness. Terror.

Everyone was leaving him, always. No one stayed. And now Sebastian…

Sebastian promised. How could he die? How could he die — protecting him?

No. No, it wasn’t possible. It wasn’t.
“Didn’t know your attachment was that strong, kid,” Rassford drawled mockingly. “He’s just a butler.”

Ciel looked at him slowly, still shocked.

Was it really over? His revenge. His plans. Over some… game? Because of this insignificant worm?

Rassford aimed at him again and Ciel just stared. He thought he should be angry, furious, maybe even hysterical, but all he felt was numbness. Caught between shock and disbelief, he couldn't even breathe, never mind speak.

“Goodbye,” Rassford said tonelessly, but before he could fire, a loud sigh pierced the silence.

Stunned, Ciel watched how Sebastian started to move, stretching his limbs as if from a lengthy sleep. Finally, he stood up, studying the hole in his chest curiously.

“Your gun is rather old, Mr. Rassford,” he noted, his voice brimming with disapproval. “To be honest, I expected something newer. I am already familiar with the impact of this exact type of bullets.”

Ciel’s vision turned black for a second. His ears filled with the thudding of his pulse as he stared at Sebastian, unable to believe his eyes.

He was alive.

He was alive.

He was alive.

Ciel must have made some sort of sound because Sebastian glanced at him, his eyes amused.

Amused.

The bastard thought this was funny.

Ciel barely noticed how Sebastian moved to Rassford. He didn’t pay attention to the loud, horrified scream, to the sound flesh being torn. To the thud that must have signified Rassford’s death.

Ciel didn’t care. His heart was still beating erratically, flashes of nightmares flickering before his eyes, making him gasp for breath, confusing his realities.

His dead parents, surrounded by orange flames.

No, the basement. He was in the basement. There were no flames here.

Dead children around him, their empty eyes staring at him accusingly because Ciel lived and they didn’t. Their blood splattered everywhere as a constant, inevitable reminder of what was waiting for him.

No, he was safe. Not for long, but for now. No one would touch his body — it was his soul that would be eventually destroyed.

Dead Sebastian. And with him, Ciel’s every hope. Dead. Shattered.
No, Sebastian was here. He was kneeling in front of him, breaking into his personal space, his eyes half-closed in expression of endless pleasure. He was breathing in deeply, as if he was… enjoying this. As if he was actually drinking in Ciel’s anguish. As if he found the taste of his pain irresistible.

Monster. He was a monster. An utter, despicable monster.

Relief, fury, and disgust were warring for dominance. Ciel didn’t know what he wanted more — to stay like this, in Sebastian’s proximity, assuring himself that he was indeed alive… to slap him, to pry the gun from Rassford’s dead fingers and shoot him again, and again, and again… or to flee — far from here. From his embarrassing breakdown. From another one of humiliations he had only himself to blame.

Of course Sebastian wouldn’t die from a simple human bullet. He was a demon. A goddamn demon who must have lived for hundreds of years already, who must have served countless masters and who had been shot numerous times.

People couldn’t kill demons. It was impossible. And yet he still fell for it despite knowing that Sebastian had been planning something — something to test him.

He had failed the test. Instead, he had given Sebastian an unplanned feast, letting him feed on his pain.

Sebastian’s eyes were still half-closed in bliss, the smile on his lips so otherworldly that it chilled Ciel to the bones.

Licking his lips, Ciel desperately tried to gather his thoughts and to determine the best course of actions. Visions of the past were still trying to break through his resolve, making it difficult to focus, to remove the image of unmoving, bleeding Sebastian from his mind.

Sebastian almost purred, leaning even closer.

“Call my name,” he whispered, and this time, it was too much.

“Get away from me, demon!” Ciel hissed, pushing him away with all strength he possessed. Shaking, he managed to stand up, trying to ignore a small pool of blood under his feet — Sebastian’s blood. Probably still warm. “You…”

“Your order has been fulfilled, my lord,” Sebastian stood up with him, touching his hair affectionately. His touch was tender, but there was so much vicious hunger burning in his eyes that Ciel felt sick.

“Don’t touch me,” he breathed out. “You… you…”

He didn’t have the right words. There was nothing he could say that wouldn’t making him look even more pitiful.

“I’m touched that you were worried about me, Young Master,” Sebastian uttered, his gentle voice contradicted by his predatory, amused stare. “I wondered about that. I wondered how you would react.”

“Well, I hope you sated your curiosity,” Ciel tried to speak coldly but he wasn’t sure he was successful. His voice continued to tremble. “I admit, you have taken me aback. For a moment, I thought you were dead and that Rassford would kill me — because of your incompetence.”
“I would never let anything happen to you,” Sebastian reassured him, but after what he’d done, his words sounded like a mockery.

“You’d better keep this promise — or you will never have my soul,” Ciel warned, raising his chin defiantly. “Clean everything up and get rid of the body. The game was not nearly as interesting as I hoped it would be.”

Turning away, Ciel moved up the stairs, feeling Sebastian’s eyes on his back and praying that he wouldn’t say anything.

He had to get to his room. As soon as possible.

He had to feel safe.

When the door closed after him, Ciel collapsed, hugging his knees to his chest and breathing deeply.

In. Out. Slowly. There was nothing to fear. It was just Sebastian’s stupid test, and even if Ciel had failed, it didn’t change anything. Sebastian was still alive and he was still his butler. Next time, Ciel would be prepared.

He would be all right.

Absently, he wondered how many times he had to repeat it to believe his own words.

Chapter End Notes

I always found it interesting how Ciel reacts to Sebastian getting shot in E2 of S1. His first instinctive reaction is fear, even though at that point, he clearly knows that bullets cannot hurt Sebastian. Regardless, he still starts to scream his name before he remembers himself. I couldn't help but wonder how he would react the very first time it happened.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Hi, everyone! Thank you all so much for your support - I'm thrilled to see you are enjoying this story. This is a relationship-focused chapter - the next one will finally have Ciel and Sebastian doing some headhunting.

The flames came back, higher and more scorching than ever. Ciel whimpered, lost in the middle of them, unable to see or hear anything but the roaring of fire.

His parents were dead. He knew it. He didn't need to see their bodies — the knowledge was there, as solid and irrevocable as realisation that he, too, was going to die soon.

The flames hissed, licking closer to him, slowly melting his skin off his bones. Ciel cried — in fear, in pain, in helpless fury. When the wall of fire began to close over him, he threw himself forward, right into the flames, desperately hoping that he would find the door behind them and that a brief contact with fire wouldn't kill him.

To his surprise, he felt no pain. The flames let him in easily, and then there was indeed a door and a long corridor — the one that led to the final exit from this hellish trap.

When there were just several steps left to safety, something stopped him. Ciel turned and saw a tall, dark silhouette standing on the opposite end of the corridor. He couldn't see the face from here, but something about this figure — its contours, the unnatural stillness with which it was holding itself, was instantly, instinctively recognisable.

Sebastian.

Ciel glanced at the door, then back at Sebastian.

He didn't need him right now — the exit was right in front of him. He didn't need his help. And yet...

He started moving before he even realised it. The fire was near, it could burst from one of the rooms any moment now, but Ciel continued to walk toward Sebastian. He didn't know why; he wasn't sure why Sebastian felt safer than the actual exit.

“What are you doing here?” Ciel asked when he finally approached. Sebastian looked at him silently, his eyes glistening in a strange, ominous way.

Ciel shivered, even more unsure now, but instead of retreating, he just stepped closer.

“We are leaving,” he ordered. “Take me out of here.”

Sebastian smiled and opened his arms, and Ciel stepped into them without hesitation, expecting to be picked up. However, Sebastian’s hands went to his hair, caressing it gently, and then slipped down his neck. Ciel lifted his head in surprise.

Despite the soft touch, Sebastian’s eyes were cold. His grip tightened, and when Ciel gasped, he
did pick him up — by the neck. Pressure made him choke, but Ciel did not try to pull free, for a reason he couldn’t understand. He didn’t try to fight even as Sebastian carried him back to the room from which he had escaped earlier, bringing him back to the fire. Then he tossed him right in the middle of it, confident and indifferent as ever, and this time, the fire did hurt. The flames tore into him mercilessly, filling him with liquid, agonizing pain, and Ciel screamed — burning, burning... Burning.

He woke up with a start, panting as if he’d run a mile. For a second, he could still feel the toxic smoke in his lungs, the bitterness from Sebastian’s betrayal, and then his consciousness slammed back in, chasing the illusions away.

He was in his bed. In his house. There was no fire — there hadn’t been for almost a year now. It was just a nightmare, one of many, and it was high time he got used to them and stopped panicking.

Annoyed with himself, Ciel left the bed and walked towards the window, staring at the bare greyness.

At least he hadn’t screamed this time, or Sebastian would have come to wake him up.

Months had passed since their game with Rassford. Three more games had happened after it, and yet the nightmares were still vivid — and each of them now involved Sebastian, in one way or another.

When would it stop?

The floor was wintry cold despite the fire cracking in the fireplace. Ciel stared at it and nausea crawled up his throat, bringing back the memories of smoke, heat, death.

No. Stop.

He forced himself to look away, wrapping his arms around himself when more coldness came in a wave.

He hated winters.

A soft knock startled him. Ciel frowned, cursing Sebastian and his hearing, and then mumbled, “Come in.”

Sebastian walked inside, holding a candlestick in his hands.

“Young Master,” he said flatly. “Is something wrong? You are supposed to be sleeping at this hour.”

“I was. Then I woke up.”

“Would you like me to bring you something soothing to drink? Some milk?”

“No, thank you. You can leave. I won’t need you tonight.”

“Very well,” Sebastian smiled and Ciel narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He became well acquainted with Sebastian’s smiles by now, and this allegedly innocent one meant that Sebastian was going to be especially annoying. “Only after you return to your bed.”

Why the hell was Sebastian so obsessed with his regimen? Ciel shouldn’t have encouraged it. It was much more satisfactory when Sebastian left him alone whenever he asked, like he had been
doing during the first month of their life together. He paid no attention to Ciel’s state then — if Ciel dismissed him, he went, asking no further questions.

This more responsible version of a butler was maddening.

“I’ll return to it in a minute,” Ciel said calmly.

“You should do it now, Master — you are cold.”

“I’m not.”

“Your feet are turning blue.”

“No, they are not!” Ciel shouted indignantly before he cringed, realising how childishly that sounded.

Sebastian remained unmoved.

“It is your birthday tomorrow — or rather, today,” he said. “You should rest particularly well.”

The reminder darkened Ciel’s mood further, bringing a familiar, bitter taste of loss with it.

“I already said that I am not going to celebrate it,” he uttered dully. “I also remember ordering you not to mention it again. Or did you forget?”

Something peculiar flickered in Sebastian’s eyes before he sent him a small smile.

“No,” he assured. “I simply wondered if you changed your mind.”

“Do I change my mind often?”

“Young Master—”

“Leave,” Ciel demanded curtly, climbing back to his bed. “I’m going to sleep now and I don’t want to hear even one word about my birthday in the morning. Understood?”

“Perfectly,” Sebastian bowed and left the room, throwing him one last strange glance.

Why did Ciel have a feeling that there was something about tomorrow he wasn’t aware of?

***

His suspicions intensified in the morning, when Sebastian took extra time to pick his outfit and hovered over him in that irritating manner of his, making sure that everything looked perfect. He was also unexpectedly quiet, to the point where it was impossible to tolerate it and say nothing.

“Sebastian.” Ciel was surprised at how calm and detached he sounded. “What have you done?”

Sebastian gave him a long, studying gaze, as if deciding whether he should confess or not. Before
Ciel could snap at him in outrage for even considering disobeying, though, he said, “Madam Red has written me a letter, insisting that I organise a celebration event today. After careful consideration, I decided that it is my responsibility as a butler to ensure that you enjoy your birthday. Celebrations of this kind are common in England, so I followed Madam Red’s advice and invited her and the Midfords. They are to arrive in three hours. Additionally, I have made all preparations for a celebratory lunch — I am making your favourite—”

“Shut up,” Ciel interrupted him coldly. Sebastian fell silent. Several minutes passed in silence, with Ciel trying to breathe slowly and soothe the rage boiling in him. When he thought he could control his voice, he spoke again.

“You disobeyed me.”

“Not directly,” Sebastian said carefully, and Ciel glared at him.

“You knew very well what I meant. I stated explicitly that I don’t want to hear anything about my birthday — tell me, how does it translate to inviting all these noisy people into my house?”

“Based on Madam Red’s letter, I came to a conclusion that birthday celebrations have always been a big event in your family. Your parents—”

“…are dead,” Ciel hissed, clenching his fists in fury. “Have been dead for a year as of today. My life has ended this day, too — I have a seal on my eye to prove it. And you think I’d want to celebrate something like this? Are you a complete idiot?”

“Young Master—”

“I accepted that you know nothing of humans — demons can’t feel any real emotions, so obviously you cannot understand them in others. But even you couldn’t possibly be this moronic! I thought you’ve made progress over this year but now I see you remained just as half-witted!”

Sebastian clenched his jaw tightly and a familiar wave of dark satisfaction welled inside Ciel. He managed to make Sebastian angry. Not annoyed, but genuinely angry.

Not many people could boast of it.

Even less people remained alive afterwards.

Sebastian hated imperfection and he hated being imperfect in anything. He hated being called out on it even more, so Ciel added venomously, “Incompetent,” and watched how Sebastian’s face darkened further.

Good. He deserved that.

“May I remind you that it is your aunt who suggested the idea of celebration?” Sebastian said tightly, and Ciel immediately retorted.

“She doesn’t know me. You were supposed to.”

It was the right answer — something dark and possessive flared in Sebastian’s eyes, and Ciel imagined him recalling every bit of information he had gathered during this time, everything that he needed to become the perfect butler.

He was probably thinking of nightmares that Ciel still had weekly, waking up screaming —
confused, scared, and disoriented. He could also be thinking of the scene he had witnessed when they made their contract, of that big, elegant room, with the smell of blood and perversion thick in the air. Or about the manor, silent and ruined after everything that had occurred inside, a shadow of what it had been once. Sebastian had restored it, but even though he managed to copy everything, down to the tiniest cracks and holes in the walls, it still wasn’t the same. Could never be the same.

No, Ciel did not want to celebrate the day that had led to the destruction of everything he had ever held dear. He didn’t want to celebrate the day of his own death, because however long his and Sebastian’s contract lasted, it was still a reprieve rather than salvation.

Even someone as emotionally dead as Sebastian had to understand this.

“Get everything ready for their arrival,” Ciel ordered roughly. “I don’t want to see you until then.”

Sebastian looked strangely stricken. He nodded silently, slowly, and Ciel waited until he left the room before letting out a sigh. He turned to his bed, staring at it unseeingly, and then he kicked it as hard as he could. Pain shot up instantly, wrapping his foot in an infuriating, throbbing blanket of pain, and Ciel hissed in frustration. Then he cursed, realising that Sebastian must have heard it, and cursed louder out of spite, deciding that at this moment, he didn’t care what Sebastian thought. Inviting Madam Red and the Midfords! What was he thinking? The whole day, which was unpleasant to begin with, was now ruined entirely.

His leg continued to throb. Ciel limped to his bed forlornly, wanting to hide among the thick blankets but knowing that he couldn’t — not unless he wanted to have to summon Sebastian once again and ask him to change his wrinkled clothes.

He couldn’t even allow himself something this small because today belonged to other people.

The noise, the boring wishes; sympathetic smiles and softly-spoken words meant to bring comfort — words that only made him uncomfortable and bitter.

Pretending to be something he wasn’t all day.

Just what his idea of fun entailed.

***

“Ciel!” Elisabeth threw himself at him before Ciel could even mutter the words of greeting, attacking him with her golden locks, the endless frills of her green dress, and with her flowery perfume all at once. Not that Ciel minded any of those separately, but definitely not when they were pushed right into his face all at once.

Clearing his throat, he murmured, “I hope your journey was pleasant.”

Elisabeth finally pulled back and started to answer when Madam Red took hold of him and hugged him tightly, cooing and refusing to let go.
“Happy birthday, Ciel!” Elisabeth exclaimed, beaming at him with innocence and sincerity that were almost painful to watch. Ciel fidgeted, torn between annoyance and an unusual protective instinct.

It confounded him that Elisabeth could stay absolutely the same after everything that happened. Logically, he knew that whatever happened to him hadn’t happened to her, so there was no reason for her to change, but still… coming to terms with it was harder than he expected.

Now, looking at her, he found himself unable to believe that just a year ago, he had been exactly like her. Carefree, joyous, naïve… happy. Blissfully happy and unaware of the evil biding its time to attack when he least expected it.

Elisabeth was a reflection of everything good that had been present in his life before that day, and Ciel felt strangely compelled to protect her, to preserve this innocence and this openness, even if he would never be able to relate to them again.

His eyes must have lingered on her because Elizabeth flushed while Madam Red smirked and winked at him knowingly. Ciel scowled before he could stop himself, nearly groaning when he realised that Elisabeth’s parents and Edward were also looking at him, having caught this embarrassing display.

“Happy birthday,” Aunt Francis said, giving him a rare smile, and then her features hardened. “Butler,” she uttered sharply. “Why are you still standing here? You should be unloading the carriage by now — there are presents for your Master there.”

Sebastian, who had collected the heavy coats and was now standing silently, bowed.

“Right away,” he murmured. He glanced at Ciel briefly, his eyes dark and expressionless, but Ciel thought he looked troubled — to an extent.

Or maybe he just wanted him to be.

“Really, Ciel, you should fire that man. He does not correspond to the standards that the butler of the Phantomhive family must adhere to.”

“I don’t know, he corresponds to all standards of mine,” Madam Red drawled, and when Aunt Francis narrowed her eyes at her, she laughed. Her laughter sounded empty, but then again, it always did to Ciel. Maybe it was a part of her personality.

Alexis was the next in line for a hug and Ciel tolerated it, even though his lips started hurting from smiling so much.

“Ciel, promise you will open my present first!” Elisabeth implored. Ciel nodded and Edward immediately glared at him, as if agreeing to comply with his sister’s request was a mortal offense.

Ciel already felt tired of their company, even though it had only been five or seven minutes.

“Back to the butler, though,” Aunt Francis noted. “The fact that you are forced to rely on him so much bothers me, Ciel. He is clearly incapable of maintaining your family’s good name. If you want, I could use some of my connections and find a perfect butler, someone who—”

“Thank you, but I am satisfied with Sebastian’s services,” Ciel interrupted her. He knew that this was a mortal offense indeed — his aunt hated being interrupted, but his own patience was short today and he wasn’t going to stand and listen to his butler being insulted. Sebastian was his, and frankly, Aunt Francis was the only person not impressed with his abilities. Ciel couldn’t
understand where her intense dislike was coming from.

“I like Sebastian, too,” Elisabeth joined in. “He cooks the most delicious things! That cake from several months ago was flawless, I have never tasted something like that before.”

Yes — in fact, Elisabeth had enjoyed it so much that she had eaten his portion. Ciel still felt sourly about it, and even though Sebastian had prepared an identical cake later, it still didn’t taste the same.

And where was Sebastian? How long was he going to pretend unloading that carriage? It couldn’t have taken him more than several seconds.

As if hearing his thoughts, Sebastian walked back inside, smiling his usual meaningless smile.

“If you would follow me,” he said politely.

“You need more servants,” Aunt Francis grumbled as they moved towards the dining room.

“Stop harassing the poor boy, Francis,” Alexis uttered good-naturedly. Ciel pretended he hadn’t heard her, and considering Sebastian’s refusal to comment despite his tensed shoulders, he’d chosen the same option.

At least this day would be hellish not for Ciel alone.

***

Hellish was an understatement. Lunch and everything that came after were a complete and utter torture.

Elisabeth kept pestering him about presents. Aunt Francis kept pestering him about Sebastian. Madam Red kept gushing about people he didn’t know and didn’t want to know. Alexis, surprisingly, was the worst — he was telling him stories about the Phantomhives, everything he knew and remembered, and Ciel just wanted him to shut up. After an hour, he felt ready to explode, so he tried to distract himself by watching Sebastian, who was tirelessly trying to be perfect despite Aunt Francis’ persistent criticism.

It was amusing. The harder Sebastian tried, the faster he moved, the more helpful he was, the more criticism Aunt Francis unleashed on him, and Ciel found it endlessly entertaining.

It didn’t mean that he appreciated such comments, though, especially when they were directed at him.

“And your outfit,” Aunt Francis was saying, frowning, eyeing him with obvious disapproval. “I understand this is your birthday, but don’t you think you’ve gone a little too far with all these…” she hesitated. “Details,” she added awkwardly, and then her eyes narrowed dangerously. “Is Sebastian choosing your wardrobe for you?”

As the matter of fact, he was, but Ciel wasn’t going to say that. He liked how he looked —
otherwise, he’d have never agreed with Sebastian’s choices.

“I think Ciel looks wonderful,” Elisabeth intervened suddenly, and Aunt Francis immediately focused on her.

Using this temporary reprieve, Ciel moved aside, towards the window, staring at the falling snow. Sebastian walked to him, with the same strange hesitancy he had been demonstrating since morning.

“Young Master,” he murmured quietly. “You are limping. Have you hurt your leg?”

“No,” Ciel replied automatically.

“I could say that you are tired and see your guests out. All you have to do is order.”

“Your quests, since you were the one to invite them,” Ciel corrected him maliciously. “And no, I don’t need you to do anything. I’ve had enough of you twisting and misinterpreting my orders. Leave me alone.”

With a silent nod, Sebastian obeyed, and Ciel went back to staring at the snow.

“Nephew, what are you doing there? Come here!” Madam Red called, and Ciel fought the urge to hit his head against the window repeatedly.

They couldn’t leave soon enough.

***

When his house became blissfully quiet, Ciel finally allowed himself to relax. Anger was still simmering in him, though, so when Sebastian tried to initiate a conversation lightly, Ciel shut him down.

He continued to do so for the next several days — anger had left by then, but vindictive pleasure remained.

His coldness bothered Sebastian. Now he was absolutely sure. Sebastian didn’t deal well with rejection, so Ciel doubled his efforts, going as far as refusing to even taste the desserts that Sebastian kept making for him. As the result, Sebastian started to get more creative with his cooking, to the point where Ciel couldn’t determine if it was funny or disturbing.

Whatever Sebastian was doing, it wasn’t because he genuinely felt sorry and wanted Ciel’s forgiveness. There had to be something else here, and this something pushed Ciel’s thoughts in the darkest direction.

Sebastian had proven time and time again that he could disobey him. He had already tried to break the contract and consume his soul by tricking him. He proceeded to interpret Ciel’s orders in the way he wanted several times after that, whenever he felt like it. And if he could do that, then Ciel’s nightmares weren’t baseless. Contract or not, Sebastian could hurt him. Could betray him.
Why did he bother with being in Ciel’s good graces, then? Why was it important to him?

Could Ciel choose to end the contract because of Sebastian’s disobedience, with no personal repercussions?

He thought about it for a while, wondering if he should discuss it with Sebastian directly — and, most importantly, if he could ever actually trust the words of that slippery creature.

His leg was still hurting but at least he stopped limping, so the next day, Ciel decided to go riding. If he didn’t get tired so easily, it would be one of his favourite activities. He loved it — the sense of power he felt when riding, the way he merged with the horse entirely, making it move almost with his thoughts alone.

He had never enjoyed riding until Sebastian’s lessons.

Scowling — why did his thoughts always turn to Sebastian?, Ciel picked his horse and spent some time on trying to prepare everything the way he had seen Sebastian do it. Finally, when he was more or less sure that the saddle wouldn’t move, he climbed up and froze when he heard a low chuckle.

“My, my,” Sebastian said, looking at him from the shadows. “Young Master has managed to mount the horse all by himself, without asking for help. What possessed you to do such a thing?”

“Well, it’s not like I can rely on you, can I?” Ciel snapped. He hated being taken aback. Where did Sebastian come from — was he following him around the house?

He could sense Sebastian’s displeasure without having to look at him. Then he sensed him getting closer, and this time, he did look.

Sebastian checked the saddle, tightened the tie strap, and then sent Ciel a contemplative glance.

“Would you like me to accompany you? A competition, perhaps?”

“What, are you going to ride a horse, too? I’ve never seen you on one.”

“I do not need a horse to keep up with you.”

Ciel stared at him, his mouth agape, before curling his lips in derision.

“Are you planning to run after me?” he asked in disbelief, and Sebastian smirked.

“Not after you, no,” he said. “We should have a final destination in mind. Do you remember how to ride to the lake?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then it’s decided. I will meet you there.”

“And how is that supposed to be entertaining? You will just use your demonic powers and reach that lake even before I leave the stables. No, it has to be a real competition.”

“Such as?”

“You will choose a medium speed and you will try to avoid collision with my horse. I will try to trample you.”
It was Sebastian’s turn to stare at him in disbelief.

“You will try to trample me,” he repeated. “That is certainly… novel. However, I do not think that your horse will comply. Horses do not trample people unless trained for it specifically.”

“Oh,” Ciel frowned in disappointment. He still wasn’t sure what to do about mindless aggression that kept burning in him whenever he thought of the long list of Sebastian’s betrayals — small, but betrayals nonetheless. A chance to see him physically hurt, to test his own reaction, was intriguing, especially after the last incident where he had only embarrassed himself.

He didn’t care if Sebastian was hurt. He would prove it — now or later, but he would. This time, he would react differently.

“In that case, I won’t be needing your company,” Ciel announced. Without waiting for a reply, he directed his horse forward, leaving Sebastian behind.

As it turned out, it wasn’t for long. Soon, his peripheral vision caught something dark moving alongside his horse, and when he glanced there, he saw Sebastian who was… running? sliding?... on his level easily, without even looking where he was going, too busy watching Ciel.

“What are you doing?” Ciel shouted at him, his voice fighting the strength of the wind. “Stop that. I told you I don’t want your company.”

“I’m afraid you will have to make it into a direct order,” Sebastian said without pausing. “To me, this looks like a good time for some running.”

“You look ridiculous. Stop it,” Ciel said again, but he couldn’t help but check if Sebastian was still keeping up with him.

It did look ridiculous. The speed and effortlessness of Sebastian’s movements were unnatural, his legs and his hands were moving so quickly that it was difficult to tell them apart. After watching him for a while, Ciel started to feel surreal because Sebastian was blurring into one impossible picture, and he wasn’t sure if he found it spooky or funny.

“Will you stop? What if someone sees this?” he asked, and to his mortification, his lips began to tremble from barely suppressed laughter.

Sebastian must have noticed it — he always noticed everything. His smirk grew smugger and he managed to somehow shake his head without breaking pace.

“I will sense if there is anyone in the vicinity, Master,” he said. “You shouldn’t worry about it.”

“I’m not worried,” Ciel huffed, and it was true. He wasn’t worried — he was amused. Perhaps even… happy? The wind kept ruffling his hair, the cold, crisp air burned his lungs in the most delightful way, and the blurring image of Sebastian’s limbs was still too funny to keep a serious expression. Ciel laughed, genuinely and too loudly for the sound to be decent. He saw how Sebastian’s smirk softened to a smile in response.

“It is too cold for you to be inhaling so much winter air,” he noted. “Maybe it is time to take a break?”

Ciel started to answer when Sebastian suddenly tripped over something. It lasted for half a second only — he found a balance again immediately, but Ciel noticed and his eyes widened incredulously.
“You tripped!” he exclaimed, the excited disbelief clear in his voice. “Aunt Francis was right — you are clumsy!”

At such speed, he couldn’t properly read Sebastian’s expression — then again, maybe it was just blank.

“I am not,” Sebastian said, and the dignity he tried to convey would have been more effective if he wasn’t still moving like a crazed, blurry toy. “I do not trip.”

“You just did! You were too busy nagging at me to pay attention to where you are going!”

“Unlike humans, I experience no difficulties when doing several things at once.”

“Liar,” Ciel rolled his eyes. Sebastian glowered, his eyes flashing red suddenly, and Ciel’s horse jerked, letting out a frightened screech. A moment — and Ciel went flying, his heart jumping to his throat from the unexpectedness of it. There was no fear, though — as if his mind was confident that he would be saved.

He wasn’t disappointed — Sebastian caught him before he landed and cradled him to his chest.

“You really are useless,” Ciel muttered with a sigh. He wasn’t in a hurry to pull away — despite being a demon, Sebastian was warm, or at least warmer than the air around them. It was comforting. It was nice.

“I did not let you come to any harm, did I?” Sebastian objected.

“You were the reason why my horse threw me off its back in the first place.”

“You should have held on, Young Master — didn’t I teach you how? Perhaps we need more lessons.”

“Perhaps not,” Ciel told him. “What I would like to do instead is to discuss our contract.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow in obvious curiosity.

“Is there something you would like to know?” he asked carefully.

“Yes. I would like to know why you allow yourself to disobey me and how much farther your disobedience could stretch.”

As soon as he said it, relief and trepidation filled him and Ciel fell silent, waiting for the answer.

It felt good to finally ask Sebastian directly, after all time he’d spent wondering, distressed and unsure.

Granted, Sebastian could lie again… but if he did, Ciel hoped he would be able to catch it.

“I do not disobey you,” Sebastian said finally. Ciel expected him to put him down already, but as Sebastian continued to hold him and it was warmer this way, he didn’t protest. “My first goal is to protect your interests, even if you might not see it this way at the time.”

“Your goal is to protect my life, not my interests,” Ciel pointed out. “And even if you were concerned about it, how is organising my birthday celebration relevant?”

“There are different ways of interpreting orders,” Sebastian said vaguely and Ciel fought the impulse to growl at him. Then, remembering he was a Watchdog, he did growl, and Sebastian’s
“Sebastian,” Ciel stared at him intently, and suddenly, he knew what he had to do. “I order you to give me direct, comprehensive, honest answers to the questions I am going to ask.”

Sebastian didn’t like it — Ciel could see it in the slight stiffening of his posture, in how his eyes darkened visibly.

“Yes, my lord,” he said, his voice reluctant, and Ciel grinned somberly.

“Good,” he uttered. “Question one. Can you hurt me physically, despite being in a contract with me? Deliberately?”

“Yes,” Sebastian replied evenly, and Ciel froze, his nightmares rising to the surface with the terrifying speed. Sebastian didn’t look away. His eyes were getting redder and crueler, and Ciel’s lungs constricted in panic. A cold chill poured down his spine and he tried not to shiver, not to look away from the danger that he suddenly found himself in.

However, when Ciel blinked, Sebastian’s eyes were back to normal, and when he spoke, his voice was its usual mild self.

“Contract or not, I could hurt you. I could even kill you. However, I will not, because it would mean that I wouldn’t be able to touch your soul. This is an unacceptable outcome for me. I swore to protect you until you fulfil your revenge and I will do that. So you can rest in peace, Young Master.”

Rest in peace?

This time, Ciel did shiver, and Sebastian tightened his arms around him in a deceptively caring gesture.

“So… question two,” Ciel cleared his throat, trying to chase the fear away. “If you break my orders, I can break the contract? With no consequences?”

“Well, no, not exactly,” Sebastian smiled and Ciel tensed again, recognising this lips-parted, fang-glistening smile as a dangerous one. “You may indeed break the contract, and if the reason is valid, such as my disobedience, then I wouldn’t be able to consume your soul. However, I would also be under no obligation to protect you. Therefore…” Sebastian let his words linger meaningfully.

“Therefore, you will just kill me,” Ciel concluded. “One way or another, I won’t escape alive.”

“No,” Sebastian admitted, still smiling enigmatically, and Ciel lowered his eyes, focusing on the buttons of Sebastian’s frock coat.

He knew it, it wasn’t a revelation, yet still, strange melancholy seized his heart.

How long would he live? How many years waited for him until his death?

He and Sebastian had already spent eleven months together. Eleven months… on the one hand, it seemed like a fairly short amount of time, but on the other, Ciel felt as if he’d been living like this forever. During these eleven months, he learned and managed to accomplish more than he had in all previous years of his life.

It was something. Now, even with him gone, he would leave something behind — Funtom
Corporation, a few stories of his victory over the underworld members… Knowledge that he did not sully his family’s name and continued performing his duties in a satisfying manner.

The melancholy didn’t dissipate but Ciel still brightened.

He was never going to celebrate his birthday again, but maybe, if forced, he could celebrate the success he had achieved — the eleven months, and then a year and eleven months, and possibly more since he had summoned Sebastian and changed weakness into power. Celebrating death didn’t make sense, but celebrating revenge, even a slow-burn one… it was something else entirely. The only thing Ciel had to do was to stop focusing on his fears and pay attention to revenge only.

He would have died on the table in that terrible place if he hadn’t summoned his demon. Sebastian had given him more time, but the outcome remained the same, and wasn’t it what Ciel wanted?

Yes. Yes, it was. He just had to remember it and not succumb to weakness and this childish fear again. It was beneath him. Ciel would repeat it as many times as needed until it was finally engraved in his mind. And if Sebastian did break the contract and killed him sooner than they agreed, then he would still have his revenge, only on Sebastian — because Sebastian wouldn’t be able to eat his soul. It was better than nothing.

“I have the last question,” Ciel said when Sebastian started walking back to the house, following Ciel’s horse and still cradling him in his arms. “Why are you so particular about my clothing? I haven’t thought about it before Aunt Francis’s words, but it is obvious that she finds my wardrobe lacking or inappropriate in some way and I was wondering why. I do not really know much about such things, and some people did compliment me on how I look, but I still wonder. Have you been making fun of me all this time? Do you dress me so I would look stupid?”

“I dress you so you would look beautiful,” Sebastian told him. “And you do. I enjoy knowing that my meal is appealing in every way possible.”

“Oh,” was all that Ciel managed to murmur. He pressed closer to Sebastian, seeking out his warmth, thinking about what he’d just heard.

Had Sebastian just called him beautiful?

It felt nice, knowing that. Ciel wasn’t sure why — Madam Red always made praising remarks about his physical appearance, and Elisabeth did, too. It never meant anything. But somehow, coming from Sebastian, it was different. Embarrassing, but not in a bad way.

Content, Ciel closed his eyes, hoping to keep the warm glow in his chest for at least some time to come.
Hi! I'm so endlessly sorry for the looong delay with updating. To think that I actually hoped to update sooner this time! I've gone through many changes during these last two months, including losing a job and finding another one. There were more good changes than bad, but being a person who hates changes in any form and shape, it affected me quite a lot. I hate the whole adjusting period. Anyway, everything's fine now)

Thank you all for your wonderful comments and for your patience! We're finally getting closer to the start of S1 :)

“Young Master, I thought we have planned to focus on four specific lines of production for the nearest future. Are you sure that you want to introduce the new type of sweets now? In the middle of the winter?”

Ciel narrowed his eyes, knowing that it would tell Sebastian all that he needed to know. There was a pause and then Sebastian spoke again, in a voice that could barely hide how annoyed he was.

“And you’d like to choose peach as a main flavour?”

“Yes,” Ciel snapped. “And to stop you from asking more inane questions, yes, you will have to go and find these peaches. Having a demon for a butler provides me with a great opportunity to get ahead of our competitors. Not everyone can find fruits like peaches in winter, and even less people would be able to afford them. So go and locate a trustworthy supplier.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian said, and even though his face didn’t change, Ciel could clearly see the minuscule signs of irritation. Honestly, Sebastian was absolutely transparent at times and there was nothing Ciel loved more than winding him up deliberately.

“Sebastian,” he said when his demon reached the door. Sebastian actually froze before turning, probably thinking his face expressed nothing.

“Yes?”

“It has to be a lot of peaches.”

This time, Ciel almost won a glare. He smirked as he watched Sebastian leave, but as the door closed, he couldn’t help but wonder what’d gotten into him today.

Sebastian rarely allowed himself to demonstrate his displeasure with Ciel’s orders with such clarity. And why? He couldn’t be that against launching a new line of sweets. It seemed like he was reluctant to leave, and if he was a human, Ciel would understand. Merely looking at the blizzard outside made him shiver. But Sebastian was a demon. Surely taking a trip wasn’t that much of a hardship?

Sighing, Ciel looked at his table, staring at the pile of unopened letters. He loved Funtom, and he started to enjoy and even anticipate the cases Her Majesty assigned to him, but sometimes, the
amount of correspondence that came with it was positively frustrating. Now that he had proven that he was a force to be reckoned with, everyone suddenly wanted to be his friend, to ask him for financial support and sponsorship. Half of these beggars were frauds who hoped he was either soft-hearted enough to buy into their sob-stories or greedy so as to invest into companies that didn’t even exist in the blind hope to gain profits.

Idiots.

With another sigh, Ciel started to work, turning to glance into the window every now and then.

He wondered if Sebastian was going to find the peaches in some greenhouses in London. Or would he have to go to Asia, or India, or wherever peaches could be growing at this time of the year?

Briefly, Ciel toyed with the idea of waiting for Sebastian’s return only to send him after some apricots immediately afterwards, but then he discarded it.

Whether he wanted to admit it or not, he felt calmer with Sebastian by his side. And tormenting him at home, still making him pay for that disastrous birthday party, was much more fun than sending him places.

The floorboards right behind the door suddenly creaked. The sound lasted for a half a second only but it was enough to make Ciel tense, to send coldness down his spine.

It could be nothing. His house was old, full of strange yet perfectly explainable sounds, and if Ciel had reacted to each of them, he would be jumping and flinching all the time.

But he reacted to this sound. Irrational or not, after that day, Ciel tried to listen to his instincts. And right now, they were telling him to hide.

Not letting himself think for long, trying not to imagine Sebastian’s face if it was him behind the door, Ciel dived under the table, and the next second, the door opened.

He couldn’t see much of anything from here but he sensed how someone stepped into the room. Then an unfamiliar voice spoke, “He’s not here. Damn it! We should check other rooms.”

“There are too many of them. What if his servants see us?”

“He doesn’t have servants, Robert, I told you. There’s only his butler and an old man. We’ll take care of them easily. Ashton has already gone to check the kitchen.”

Panic and anger gripped Ciel instantly, twisting him inside out.

The intruders. Some strangers who came here to hurt him, again. And now they were also planning to hurt Tanaka?

Tanaka was strong, especially for someone his age. Ciel knew he could fight — he had fought the attackers on that fateful night, but he had lost, ended up with a knife in his back. He was still recovering and Ciel doubted he’d be able to deal with the intruders now. He didn’t even know how many of them were here.

Gritting his teeth, Ciel thought, ‘Sebastian. Sebastian, I need help. Come here right now.’

His mark reacted, but who knew how long it would take for Sebastian to respond to his summons? He’d left about forty minutes ago. With his powers, he could be on the other end of the world now, and even he wouldn’t be able to cross this distance in five minutes.
Which meant that Ciel had to come up with his own plans.

Escaping wouldn’t be difficult, these morons didn’t even bother to check the rooms properly, but what about Tanaka? Ciel couldn’t just leave him. He had to distract at least a part of the attackers, to drag everything out for as much as possible, until Sebastian came.

Making sure that there were no more sounds near the door, Ciel crept out from under the table and moved towards the kitchen. He knew his house enough to move soundlessly, bypassing the potentially dangerous places.

The closer he approached, the more sounds he heard. A loud crash and a pained cry of a stranger made Ciel speed up, but when another crash was accompanied by Tanaka’s groan, he broke into a run. Anger flared up, making the fear retreat temporarily, pushing him forward without caring about the noise he was making.

He stopped several feet away from the kitchen, thinking rapidly.

He wouldn’t last long in a fight, if at all. He wasn’t very good at running either, but he had an advantage of knowing the house.

It would have to suffice.

“Hey!” he shouted loudly. “I’m tired of playing hide-and-seek. What kind of amateurs are you? I’ve been following you all around the house and you failed to even notice it!”

Ciel didn’t wait for the reaction. As soon as he uttered the last syllable, he dashed along the corridor, hearing indignant and triumphant yells behind.

He hoped the majority would forget about Tanaka and take a chance to catch him. After all, he was the reason they came here.

And where was this damned demon? How much more time did he need?

Very soon, Ciel realised he’d underestimated the intruders. They were much faster than him, they followed him so closely that he couldn’t even pick a room to hide inside without it being noticed, and the distance between them was getting shorter by the moment.

Feeling that his heart was starting to protest against the strain, Ciel threw himself into one of the rooms on the second floor, slamming the door shut. He had about forty seconds, maybe a minute before the attackers broke the door, so he rushed to the window, opened it and shivered when the cold wind crashed into him.

The height wasn’t too big but Ciel still hesitated, wondering if he should jump straight into the snow or try to land on the first-floor window canopy first.

The door shook under the rain of blows, and Ciel grimaced, imagining how it would feel to be beaten with such force. Was he destined to go through the same experiences over and over again?

He jumped, not allowing himself to think any longer. Hitting the canopy, he cried out from the impact and hissed when more coldness brushed against him as he slipped down, falling right into the bank of snow.

His back was aching angrily when Ciel stood up and ran to the maze decorating the territory. It wasn’t vast or tricky enough to fool his attackers, but maybe it could work.
If only it wasn’t this cold.

Ciel took a series of turns he used to take when he and Elisabeth were playing their own version of hide-and-seek, feeling how his teeth began to chatter. By the time he reached his usual hiding spot, he was violently cold. He put his hands around himself, trying to keep the warmth, but it was quickly seeping through his fingers, bringing even more coldness in its stead.

He wasn’t sure how long he would be able to hide here, in the snow. Coldness was his curse, and if he got out of this mess alive, he would definitely be sick for several days, if he was lucky, or for weeks if his body let him down again.

It was a usual occurrence, him always getting sick, always being weaker. Another reason why making a contract with a demon wasn’t such a bad idea.

Two shots pierced the silence suddenly, followed by screams. They weren’t the terrified, Sebastian-is-having-fun kinds of screams, though, so Ciel remained where he was, trying to imagine what was happening. Could those idiots shoot one another by accident? Then again, it was probably too much to hope for.

For a minute or so, there was silence again, and then the screams, the real screams came. Hearing terror on the verge of insanity in them, Ciel smiled in bliss, knowing exactly what it meant.

Sebastian had finally arrived.

Took him long enough.

By the time Ciel forced his numb legs to move, the screams had only gained volume. By the time he found a way out of the maze, they finally stopped.

Cold retreated for a second when Ciel saw Sebastian standing next to dismembered bodies, watching them dispassionately. Despite his calm look, his eyes were flaring bright red and his lips were parted in a fierce snarl. When he reacted to Ciel’s appearance by turning to look at him, the snarl stayed, but Ciel was too happy to think about wariness.

“F-finally,” he said, though his teeth were chattering so loudly that he barely managed to push the words out. “I g-got tired of w-waiting.”

His voice seemed to wake Sebastian from his blood-soaked slumber because he blinked and then moved to him in one speedy motion, grabbing him protectively.

“Y-you should c-check if T-Tanaka’s okay,” Ciel murmured, but he already wrapped his hands around Sebastian’s neck, snuggling closer to him, shivering hard when the first weak flickers of warmth started to course through his body. “Where… W-where the hell… were you?” he asked. “I excpe… expe…” Frustrated with himself, he stopped talking and just sighed, tightening his grip around Sebastian.

He didn’t even notice how they moved to the house, and then to his room. When Ciel looked at Sebastian again, he saw that his lips were moving, meaning that he was obviously saying something, but even when he tried, he couldn’t recognise a sound. His eyelids felt heavy and his body was still trembling, so he closed his eyes, knowing that he was safe, and that whatever was happening to Tanaka, Sebastian would see to it.

It was good to have such a competent butler, late as he was.
“This is unacceptable, Sebastian,” Tanaka was saying, and Ciel forced himself to open his eyes because he had never heard his ex-butler sound so upset. “Young lord could be seriously hurt. He already was, you know his health is very weak.”

“I’ve managed to reduce his fever,” Sebastian replied. “In terms of—”

To Ciel’s amazement, Tanaka actually interrupted him.

“It should have never happened. The Phantomhive servants are supposed to protect their Masters, not have their Masters protect them! I believe it is time to expand the household.”

“There is no need to—”

“Sebastian, I know you are very capable. The boy also trusts you, and Lord knows, after everything he’s been through, it’s a miracle. But we still need more servants for the times when you’re away. We cannot allow the situation to repeat itself.”

More servants?

Ciel frowned, unsure how he felt about it. He appreciated the quiet and exclusive world he had built for himself, with Sebastian as his only constant companion and with Tanaka making brief appearances. Having more unfamiliar people here would be extremely bothersome.

On the other hand, Tanaka was right. If Sebastian was away… If both of them were away on business, someone had to protect the house. It wasn’t right to expect Tanaka to do it.

But more people… how could he ever trust them to act in his interests?

Conflicted, Ciel felt how the sleep crept closer again, and then he gave into it, deciding to leave all decisions for when he woke up.

The first thing he saw upon waking was Sebastian who was sitting by his side patiently, with a small frown on his face.

“Welcome back, Master,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“Did you find the peaches supplier?” Ciel asked sleepily, ignoring the question. It was bad enough that he was confined to bed once again. He wasn’t going to waste more time on pointless discussions.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” Sebastian replied. “Although you are not in the state to evaluate my choice. You have a severe cold along with nasal congestion. You won’t be able to sense any flavours for at least—”

“I understand!” Ciel snapped, shifting and sitting up. “All right. But I’m not going to allow you to proceed without my approval, so the new line of candies will have to wait.”
“As you wish,” Sebastian raised his eyebrow, as if to demonstrate he couldn’t care less. Then his eyes narrowed speculatively. “If I may ask, what were you thinking when you decided to distract the criminals and run outside, in the cold, without proper clothing? Such reckless behaviour seems out of character for you, Young Master.”

“I overheard that they were going to target Tanaka.”

“Oh?” When Sebastian’s eyes narrowed further, for the first time since he woke up, Ciel understood that he was treading on thin ice. His still-clouded mind cleared in a sudden surge of panic as he recognised the warning notes in Sebastian’s voice.

He was doing something wrong. He was doing something wrong and he didn’t know what, and he had to figure it out before Sebastian understood he was clueless.

“I was under the impression,” Sebastian continued, “that your primary concern lies with your revenge. For it to happen, you need to stay alive and preferably healthy. How does your strange attempt to defend a servant fit here? Why would you risk yourself to help him? I don’t understand.”

Stupid demon. Stupid demon who despised weakness and foolishness and whose respect had to be constantly earned.

Sebastian wouldn’t appreciate a foolish, noble attempt at self-sacrifice. Ciel couldn’t explain it properly even to himself, he just knew that he had to help Tanaka. He had to, because… because. Tanaka was a part of his life that he didn’t want to lose. Tanaka belonged to him like Elisabeth belonged to him. Despite his strength in the past, he was vulnerable after the attack, and at that moment, Ciel viewed him as someone needing his protection.

But Sebastian wouldn’t understand. And Ciel couldn’t afford to alienate him. The mere thought made his heart freeze in fear.

“As a head of Phantomhive house, I’m responsible for my servants’ well-being,” he said loftily, hoping Sebastian couldn’t hear how wildly his heart was beating. “Sentiments that you imply have nothing to do with it. Tanaka is useful, he has more knowledge about this house and about my predecessor’s dealings than I currently do. If I hadn’t intervened, he would have been killed. Granted, I wasn’t going to risk my life. I expected you to come at any moment because protecting me is your responsibility, Sebastian. Therefore, I simply bought Tanaka some time. It’s unfortunate that I got sick, but I believe I will benefit from the end-result eventually.”

Sebastian tilted his head, obviously thinking about it, and Ciel allowed himself a tiny breath.

“Actually, I expected you to come sooner,” he added shortly. “Before I managed to freeze and get a cold.”

“Your health is even more fragile than that of most humans. You would have gotten a cold even if you spent a minute outside, in such weather and without your coat.”

Ciel snorted to show the extent of his contempt to Sebastian’s insinuations, even though he knew he couldn’t argue here.

“You should have still come sooner,” he announced moodily.

“I was following your initial order,” Sebastian reminded him. “And if Young Master recalls, I was reluctant to leave. We have just finished another case for the Queen. You know that the manor tends to be attacked shortly afterwards.”
“Yes, I do know. But I’m not going to let it affect my plans. So, I think Tanaka was right to suggest hiring more people.”

Sebastian looked surprised.

“I didn’t realise you could hear us,” he said, frowning as if the thought displeased him. Was he annoyed that he’d been loud enough to disturb him or that Ciel had learned about Tanaka’s suggestion before Sebastian could tell him himself? “Regardless,” Sebastian continued, “I have to agree as well. The house of Phantomhives cannot consist of two servants only. While you were resting, I’ve done a research and composed the profiles of potential candidates for you to look at. Ultimately, though, the decision has to be yours. After all, I’m merely your pawn.”

“I’m perfectly aware of it,” Ciel said. “And fine. Bring them here.”

While he waited, he could feel his confidence return to him.

Sebastian was indeed his pawn, which meant that Ciel was in control. Bad health or not, occasional sentimentality that he hoped to get rid of or not, he was in charge and he was going to act like it.

When Sebastian returned, Ciel accepted the profiles gracefully, wondering what Sebastian’s choice of good servants would be. He checked the first one, scoffed, went to look at the second one. Then the third. After the fourth, he threw the files away in exasperation.

“Do you honestly think that some thugs are going to be a good addition to our household?”

“Thugs?” Sebastian wrinkled his forehead in confusion. “I admit that they aren’t the best examples of humanity, but they possess considerable physical strength and experience. Lau highly recommended them.”

“Lau!” Ciel exclaimed. “He’s our contact in the underworld, not a reliable source of recommendations for something like this! We don’t need some brutes who will try to steal my silverware or cut my throat in my sleep after a month of service! I expected better of you, Sebastian. A decision to let someone into the house on a permanent basis is extremely serious. We have to consider all angles and understand what we need before starting searching.”

“I thought what we need is already clear,” Sebastian said patiently, his voice so condescending that for a second, Ciel wanted to hit him. “Someone to protect the house if the need arises and to help with chores.”

“To help with chores?” Ciel snorted mockingly. “What, are you telling me you can’t cope with them by yourself?”

Sebastian pursed his lips, looking so insulted that Ciel almost laughed.

“I meant for the times when we are away,” Sebastian said icily. “The house should be looked after in all ways, at all times.”

Sometimes riling him up was too easy.

“Fine,” Ciel said. “But of course, the primary attribute should be their defence abilities.”

“Finding trained, physically strong humans shouldn’t be a problem, even among non-thugs. If you are dissatisfied with my choice, I’ll compose another—”

“Physical strength is only one attribute, Sebastian. I told you, I don’t need brutes here. There are
many other abilities that could be useful.”

“Such as?”


“We will compensate them, of course,” Sebastian suggested but Ciel shook his head.

“No. Compensation cannot buy loyalty, at least not the type I would trust. For these servants to be loyal, we must offer them something else. Something more.”

Sebastian was looking increasingly ruffled at having his ideas discarded, but at the same time, his eyes were alight with genuine curiosity. With a start, Ciel realised that Sebastian was enjoying their conversation despite being unable to understand the main points.

Maybe he was enjoying it because of it. Sebastian was a strange demon.

“Such as?” he repeated.

This time, it took Ciel longer to think of an answer.

“We must offer them a home,” he said finally. Sebastian arched his eyebrow sceptically.

“Young Master, do you want me to look for people with defence abilities among the homeless?”

“No!” Ciel yelled and coughed, wincing as it echoed painfully through his body. “No,” he said again. “You don’t understand. People aren’t loyal by default if you fulfil their financial needs. But if they truly like you, if they care about you, they will be ready to do anything to help you. So we have to target emotionally vulnerable people.”

“Those who feel miserable,” Sebastian said slowly. “Those who don’t feel appreciated by others.”

“Those who would like to change their lives,” Ciel nodded. “Yes. That’d be the most logical course of actions.”

“I will start the new search immediately,” Sebastian stood up, his eyes still glistening in excitement. “Almost immediately,” he amended after glancing at Ciel. “First, I will bring your medicine. Also, you need to eat, Young Master.”

“There is no rush. I’m not going to send you anywhere for the time being, anyway.”

Sebastian looked disappointed, but then his face evened out and he bowed.

“Yes, my lord,” he said.
“Edward is unstable.”

“He corresponds to the parameters you have set, Master.”

“He might have been falsely accused of a crime he didn’t commit, but his reputation after his release is shaky at best. He attacked two of his employers. That’s saying something.”

“He could have been placed into position to defend himself.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Also, his name is Edward. In my experience, all people carrying this name hate me. Considering all these flaws, I’m not going to hire him.”

Ciel expected Sebastian to keep arguing, but he only sighed and glanced mournfully at the profile he was holding.

They had spent four days on sorting through the candidates. Ciel had no idea where Sebastian found them all, but he had to admit that this time, it was closer to what he envisioned.

If only Sebastian wasn’t this focused on physically strong and mentally unhinged individuals. What did it say about him, to be fascinated with the most unstable people? And what did it say about Ciel that he found it funny rather than disturbing?

“What about Baldroy?” Sebastian asked, pushing the file across the table. Ciel looked through it, and the more he read, the more suspicious he felt.

“He seems surprisingly normal,” he commented dryly. “Especially in comparison to others you have found so far. But what’s so special about him? He’s just a soldier.”

“A soldier who was the only survivor in the last three campaigns. Surely you don’t think it’s a coincidence,” Sebastian retorted, and even though Ciel hated being argued with, he chose to let it go.

Sebastian was acting bolder these last few days, at least during their discussions. Ciel would have warned him against it but for some reason, he enjoyed the atmosphere of easy camaraderie that reigned in his office. Sebastian was so focused on their task that he forgot himself occasionally, arguing and pushing, and Ciel simply watched, amused, without saying anything.

Sebastian treated him like an equal in these discussions, forgetting his age, forgetting their status. While Ciel held the power in their agreement, he couldn’t delude himself by thinking that it would last. Sebastian might be his pawn, but it was temporary. The truth was, Sebastian was much stronger, much smarter, and much colder than Ciel could ever hope to become. And being treated like an equal, feeling Sebastian’s respect, knowing that Sebastian seriously considered his thoughts instead of merely indulging him was so addictive that Ciel was willing to overlook these brief displays of impertinence. For now.

“You mentioned the extraordinary intuition as one of the abilities you were interested in, Young Master,” Sebastian said. “Besides, Baldroy has a personal history similar to what you’ve described. His house was destroyed in one of the military raids. His family was murdered and after this, he couldn’t find a place to settle. He willingly joined the military, presumably to affect the decisions his generals make and to avoid the destruction of civilians’ villages. However, even though he’s rumoured to be a skilled fighter, he isn’t popular among others because of his straightforwardness and insubordination. It appears that his generals try to get rid of him by throwing him into the most violent and dangerous spots. Baldroy was still alive when I checked it, and I believe he would be a valuable asset.”
“You just said that he was insubordinate,” Ciel pointed out and watched how a thin, cunning smile touched Sebastian’s lips.

“Perhaps he has simply been in the employ of inferior commanders,” he uttered. “In addition, if there is an attack, Baldroy will be able to group other servants. He has good leadership skills and experience.”

“I’ll think about him,” Ciel relented, glancing at the profile and putting it to his left. “Who else?”

“Mey-Rin. She’s a professional sniper and an assassin known for her extreme visual acuity. There are myths made up about her vision — however, she has a disadvantage. Her vision is the only attribute she can boast of and she’s soft-hearted to a degree, which makes her an unreliable assassin. She cannot always kill her targets, not if she finds something likable about them.”

“Well, what if she finds something likeable about those who attack my house?” Ciel demanded.

Sebastian shrugged.

“The majority of her victims do end up dead, so I doubt it would be an issue.”

“Having a sniper with acute vision could be just what we need,” Ciel glanced at Mey-Rin’s profile again. Someone who could see the danger from afar was invaluable, he had to give Sebastian credit for this one. “Since you’ve picked her, I take it she’s also emotionally vulnerable?”

“Her story certainly isn’t the healthiest,” Sebastian agreed. “She had a complicated childhood. She had to work from the early age to support her mother and siblings, which pushed her to becoming an assassin when she was thirteen. As I said, it was the only thing she was good at. Her mother and her siblings are all dead now, and while she has a chance to live for herself, she continues to work aimlessly. She doesn’t even touch the money she earns for the most part. She’s not a smart human, but she has potential.”

“If her eyesight is that good, it might pose a problem because she’ll be able to see every little detail,” Ciel frowned thoughtfully. “She would also probably notice how your eyes change shades. If we are going to hire her, we will have to come up with something to temper with her vision, at least on a temporary basis. She can’t know the truth, none of them can.”

“So, you are considering hiring her?” Sebastian’s face brightened, as if he was pleased with finally picking someone Ciel approved of.

“She has the abilities I need, she’s a killer, and she longs to belong somewhere. Yes, I think she’ll be a good fit.”

“Excellent,” in his excited anticipation, Sebastian moved so quickly that Ciel didn’t even catch how he went from sitting on the opposite side of the table to standing next to the door. “If you approve of her candidature, then I’ll contact her immediately and offer her a position.”

“Wait,” Ciel stopped him. He wasn’t sure what he had in mind yet, but he knew he wanted to check everything before hiring anyone, especially an assassin. “First, let’s devise a test for her.”

“A test?” Sebastian stepped back to him, intrigued.

“I want you to hire her. Pick somebody innocent as her target. For example, some happily married man. Make sure Mey-Rin sees him interact with his family. If she shoots him without hesitation, we will have to re-consider hiring her. If she refuses to pull the trigger, we’ll also have to re-evaluate her candidature. However, if she hesitates and then still tries to do her work… then you
can offer her a position.”

“That’s an interesting test,” Sebastian said slowly, and Ciel nodded, secretly bathing in the waves of approval he could feel emanate from Sebastian. “I’ll make sure it’s done right away, Master.”

Sebastian turned back to the door, this time with a normal, human speed, and Ciel suddenly realised that he had possibly sentenced an innocent man to death.

What if Mey-Rin pulled the trigger? What if Sebastian failed to stop her? Sebastian loved sadistic games. He would enjoy it if Ciel became responsible for the death of an innocent, especially if Ciel felt upset about it.

But he couldn’t stop him now, could he? Sebastian would view it as weakness again. Ciel was already on a shaky ground with him after what happened with Tanaka.

He clenched his jaw, burning Sebastian’s back with his eyes, and then he commanded sharply, “Sebastian!”

When the demon turned back again, Ciel cleared his throat. Who cared what Sebastian thought? There were boundaries that Ciel wasn’t willing to cross.

“No matter what decision Mey-Rin makes,” he said, “don’t let that man die. It’s an order.”

The surprise that flashed across Sebastian’s face was undeniable and Ciel cringed, understanding that Sebastian hadn’t even considered toying with him, at least not now.

Still, he made sure to keep his gaze hard and unrelenting, and Sebastian bowed.

“As you wish, my lord,” he replied tonelessly.
Chapter Notes

First, thank you all so much for your wonderful comments and support! It fuels my love for this fandom even further. I apologize for the long wait and I'm happy to say that the next chapters will be published much more quickly :) I'm nearly finished with my work and I'm going to take quite a long break.

WARNING: despite the harmless title, this chapter is pretty dark because it features mentions of child rape, drugging, and child death. Nothing detailed, but still, proceed with caution. The next chapter (the final of the 'Hiring' cycle) will be even darker.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ciel spent the first night with Mey-Rin in his house carefully planning how much he was going to disclose to her.

He had to found the perfect centre. He had to appear strong but give her a glimpse of vulnerability; use only general facts, but make them sufficient to secure her sympathy.

When Sebastian brought her to his office, Ciel was prepared.

Mey-Rin was already wearing the glasses he had purchased for her and they obviously affected her vision — maybe more so than Ciel had intended. As soon as she stepped inside, she tripped and fell, and Sebastian grabbed her before her face connected with the floor, holding her strongly.

When Mey-Rin finally saw him, her jaw dropped. A strange squeak escaped her and Ciel sent an unsure glance towards Sebastian who shrugged almost apologetically.

Well. They had chosen her themselves and it was too late to reconsider.

“Mey-Rin,” Ciel said. “My name is Ciel Phantomhive. I’m pleased that you have agreed to work for me.”

“I... that is, yes!” Mey-Rin made a step toward him only to trip again, and this time, Ciel frowned.

“Perhaps we need to get you better glasses,” he said. “It wasn’t my intention to leave you blind. Sebastian?”

Before Sebastian could react, though, Mey-Rin exclaimed, “Oh no, I don’t need new glasses, not at all! These are, these are lovely, I can adjust to them with no problem. I understand why you want me to wear them. I’m just nervous. I’ve never worked as a maid before and this house is so big and beautiful, it absolutely is! And you, Master... I imagined you differently. I never thought you’d be so young!”

Ciel scowled and glared at Sebastian who was audacious enough to smirk.

Maybe this time, he could let such a remark pass. At least Mey-Rin pushed the conversation in the direction he needed.
“Unfortunately, the circumstances placed me in a position that I wasn’t ready for,” he said, allowing a note of softness to touch his voice. He could feel Sebastian’s interested gaze and annoying as it was, he still found it encouraging. “My family was murdered two years ago. I was the only one left.”

“Oh!” Even though Ciel couldn’t see her eyes behind the thick glasses, he still noted how Mey-Rin’s lower lip trembled and how her voice was already full of empathy.

Just like he’d thought.

“I had to accept the title and the responsibilities that came with it,” he continued. “My goal is to make sure that Her Majesty’s concerns are eliminated before they gain the power to grow. As the result, I’ve made quite a few enemies in the underworld. Sebastian manages to deal with the majority but he can’t always win against them all.”

Sebastian’s eyes narrowed and Ciel barely hid a smirk of his own.

Served him right.

“That’s why I need your help,” Ciel stepped closer to Mey-Rin, trying to portray absolute sincerity. “I know you also had a family. I know they were taken from you. You have none of your own enemies left but you’re still frustrated and restless. Your previous job didn’t let you decide who deserved to live and who didn’t, you had to kill even those who might have been innocent.”

“It was terrible.” This time, Mey-Rin’s voice trembled as well. “The things they wanted me to do… the things I did! God will never forgive me for it. I knew and I stayed, and I—”

“Who needs His forgiveness?” Ciel scoffed before he could stop himself. ‘God’. What a joke. “Only your own forgiveness matters. When you forgive yourself, you’ll become free, but to do that, you have to remove yourself from the environment that only contributed to your unhappiness.”

Mey-Rin pressed her hands against her face, and though Ciel couldn’t see her eyes, he sensed that she was on the verge of crying.

“But it’s the only thing I’m good at,” she whispered. “Being a maid, it’s an honourable position, but I’m—”

“You know that your primary responsibility will be protecting this house,” Ciel interrupted her. “This way, you can continue doing what you’re good at, but you won’t have to feel any guilt. I can assure you that people who come here do not deserve your compassion. After all, what kind of person would want to kill a child?”

It pained him to utter these words. It pained him even more to see how amused Sebastian was by all this, but it had to be done.

Mey-Rin gasped before nodding vigorously.

“Also,” Ciel said, “I imagine you’ll have enough time to develop in other areas. You won’t be limited in anything. And who knows, you might enjoy being a maid.”

“I will!” Mey-Rin almost jumped in anticipation, clenching her skirt in her hands. “I most certainly will! I won’t let you down, Young Master! And… and you,” she turned to Sebastian, blushing and suddenly shy, and Ciel rolled his eyes.
“Of course you won’t,” Sebastian’s lips curled slightly upward, but the danger underlying this semblance of a smile was unmistakable. Judging from Mey-Rin’s shudder, she felt it, too. “I’ll make sure of it,” Sebastian added, and his smile widened when Mey-Rin backed away instinctively.

“It’s all right,” Ciel said, sending Sebastian a warning glance. Now wasn’t the time to intimidate their new servant. “If you need any help, just ask Sebastian. You should also make a list of the things you’ll need, including weapons.”

“Weapons!” The excitement in Mey-Rin’s voice was palpable. “What is the price range, sir?”

“No price range. Just make sure you have everything to ensure the protection of this house. It has already been burned once. I don’t want to repeat the experience.”

Mey-Rin made another pained noise before nodding decisively.

“Thank you, Young Master,” she murmured. “With your permission, I’ll go make that list. I’ll also need some cleaning supplies! Oh, it’s so exciting!”

Ciel could hardly imagine what was exciting about cleaning, but he smiled in response.

He waited until Mey-Rin approached the door before clearing his throat in a deliberately hesitant way.

“Mey-Rin…” he said softly. “Thank you. Your help means a lot to me.”

Satisfaction welled up in his chest when she glowed with happiness from being needed and appreciated.

“I won’t let you down,” Mey-Rin swore again, then bowed and left the room.

Soon, Sebastian nodded, indicating that she had gone beyond the range of hearing, and Ciel finally relaxed. With a sigh, he dropped onto his armchair, rubbing his temples.

“What kind of people would want to kill a child indeed,” Sebastian drawled. “That must be the first time I’ve heard you refer to yourself that way, Master.”

“Oh, shut up! I had to say something. And it worked, didn’t it? She appeared sincere. I don’t think we’ll regret our choice. Her clumsiness, though…”

“Leave it to me, my lord,” Sebastian pressed his hand to his chest. “I assure you it won’t be a problem.”

“We’ll see,” Ciel concluded. “So, we have one more servant now. Have you found any other candidates? It’d be better to hire all of them within the same time period, so they could adjust together and become a team. It’ll give them one more reason to stay and be loyal to me. I assume that Mey-Rin and people like her don’t have any friends.”

“That does remind me of someone,” Sebastian agreed, and it took Ciel a moment to realise the implication. He was unsure if he should be offended but he glared just in case.

“Did you find anyone else or not?” he demanded coldly.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” Sebastian approached his table and pulled out a thick folder. “Lau provided me with location of a secret research centre. Apparently, it is financed by both British and
American governments — the centre is masked as a prison facility but in reality, it’s focused on human experimentation. Those scientists attempt to transform their subjects into unique soldiers who would be able to withstand inhuman pressure. Specifically—”

“What?” Ciel stood up abruptly, hoping he’d heard wrong. “Are you suggesting that the Queen knows about the existence of such centre and does nothing?”

Sebastian’s eyebrows rose mockingly.

“More than that,” he drawled, amused. “The Queen knows about this centre and she was the one to fund it. I imagine she wishes to have her personal army of—”

“Shut up!” Ciel’s hands twitched with desire to slap Sebastian for even daring to say this. Confusion and indignation clashed, filling him with questions he didn’t want to think about and with automatic refusal to even consider such outrageous accusation.

It couldn’t be true. Perhaps some of the Queen’s decisions could be hasty, but human experimentation centre?

“The Queen would have never sanctioned the creation of a place like this,” Ciel said, trying to sound calm. “She can’t know about it.”

“If you say so,” Sebastian uttered, and this time, his voice was practically overflowing with mockery. “After all, who could know the Queen better than her very own Watchdog?”

“You!..”

“I apologise for speaking so rashly, Master,” Sebastian bowed deeply, his face a mask of insincere sincerity, and Ciel growled under his breath. That bastard. “If I may, there is an individual among the human subjects at the centre that could become a worthy addition to the household. His name is Finnian. I’ve collected all information I could find, so if you’d open the file…”

Ciel did, no less infuriated and concerned. When he saw the pictures, though, his thoughts about the Queen vanished. For a moment, his mind went blank, and then the memories returned, heavy and detailed and sickening.

*The cages. Constant darkness and knowledge that when the light came, it would mean the arrival of the cult, the start of a new ceremony. The start of torture. The start of—*

Ciel’s hands shook, so he lowered them and sat down quickly, hoping that Sebastian hadn’t seen it. The pictures still made him sick.

Tiny cells. Gloomy corridors and deceptively light laboratories. People, some dead, some barely resembling humans, with wounds and needle marks everywhere. Tattooed numbers on their necks marking them as subjects, not people. All of them young, and their eyes…

Ciel knew this emptiness. He knew what it meant. None of them would be able to make it back from the hell they had been dragged into.

Except…

He stared at Finnian’s file and the picture Sebastian had attached.

Finnian’s eyes were alive. Scared, desperate, but somehow still hopeful. The notes indicated that he
was being injected with something to enhance his physical strength and that the final test was to be conducted today.

Physical strength wasn’t very high on Ciel’s list of preferred attributes, but one look at Finnian’s face — and he knew he wanted him here.

“Sebastian,” he said sharply. “This is an order. Go to that centre and recruit Finnian. I want him to be here today, preferably before the last test is performed on him.”

“Why?” Sebastian seemed genuinely confused. “I’m glad you approve of my choice, Master, but the final test is likely to result in his strength reaching the maximum point. Currently Finnian is the only surviving subject, so all efforts are focused on him. The stronger he is, the more useful he is going to be to us.”

Ciel pursed his lips, disgusted and disturbed by how casually Sebastian treated the horrors that people at those centres were subjected to.

It was to be expected, of course. But still, some part of him — a part that still cringed from any reminder of the cell, darkness, blood, was strangely disappointed.

Sebastian had apparently interpreted his silence in his own way because a sneer twisted his features.

“Are you feeling sorry for Finnian, Master?” he asked, and all amusement and mockery were gone from his voice. Only warning coldness remained. “May I remind you that we’re looking for the person with the most developed abilities? It was your own idea to make the screening process so strict. Have you changed your mind simply because of sentiments? Your sympathy, perhaps?”

It was too much. Sebastian had been testing his boundaries lately and this was the place where Ciel had to stop him.

Curling his lips derisively, he pushed back against his chair, watching Sebastian intently. He had put all condescendence he could gather within himself into his look, and from how Sebastian stiffened, it obviously worked.

“How do you know the difference between sympathy and empathy, Sebastian?” Ciel asked. Before Sebastian could open his mouth, he went on, “No, I assume you don’t. Demons aren’t capable of sympathy, so I imagine you have only a vague idea of what it means. Empathy, on the other hand, is something that even creatures like you ought to experience. Let’s look at this situation differently. You, as a demon, spend quite a lot of time in the human world. Whether or not you remove all witnesses is irrelevant, there are still people who have seen or heard something, who might suspect you or other demons of being who you are. Will you deny it?”

“No,” Sebastian replied. “However, I don’t see how it—”

“One day, these people might meet. One day, they can decide to target demons. To build a centre like this one and start experimentations. To see what pain threshold you have, under what pressure you might break, what can subdue your will and even how to kill you. How to become you. Would you find it amusing, to know that some species of your kind are locked up and experimented upon?”

“It’s impossible,” Sebastian scoffed, but his eyes were wide and Ciel felt dark triumph swelling in his chest.

“It may not be possible now, but technologies are improving,” he said calmly. “You can’t know
what will happen in a hundred or a thousand years. Someone may form a contract with a demon specifically to learn about their nature. Everyone has weaknesses, I’m sure you aren’t the exception. So tell me, would you find it amusing if demons were ‘subjects’? And I order you to reply truthfully.”

Sebastian stared at him as if he were seeing him for the first time. He was startled, maybe even concerned, and Ciel couldn’t be more satisfied.

“No,” Sebastian finally said. His words were quiet and reluctant. “I would not find it amusing.”

“I thought so,” Ciel narrowed his eyes. “Even the most vicious beings can usually feel empathy. Therefore, I would appreciate it if you stopped throwing around words that you yourself aren’t capable of understanding. No, I don’t pity Finnian. I don’t sympathize with him. But I understand what he is going through and I don’t wish to subject him to further tests if it’s possible to avoid them. According to the file, he’s already strong enough.”

“But Master…” Sebastian still looked uncharacteristically lost. “To ensure your safety and the safety of the house, it would be better if the experiment was finished.”

“If it’s finished by the time you get there, then so be it. But I neither want it nor need it. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Sebastian bowed again, and Ciel allowed himself to relax when he detected no hint of previous mockery or coldness in it.

Sebastian appreciated being surprised. Hopefully, it would keep him in check for the next several weeks.

“The first thing you’ll do now is buy a hat,” Ciel said and Sebastian looked up, clearly curious.

“A hat, my lord?”

“Yes. A straw hat, and the wider it is, the better. Bring it to me and then go after Finnian. Kill those scientists. Leave none of them alive.”

“Right away,” Sebastian sent him a thoughtful look before titling his head in respect again and leaving.

Ciel let out a sigh, closing his eyes for a moment. It was morning and his head was already aching. Damn Sebastian. Couldn’t he have summoned a less infuriating demon? Those constant tests were exhausting.

On the other hand, so far, Ciel had managed to keep him interested.

He’d have to do everything possible to preserve this interest until his revenge was fulfilled.

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Sebastian had managed to complete both tasks within the shortest period. In less than two hours, Finnian was already in his office, and looking into his terrified, haunted eyes, Ciel was no longer sure he’d made the right choice.

Maybe Sebastian was right. Maybe it was indeed sentiments that had made him approve of Finnian’s candidature. This shaking, scared boy was hardly older than him, how would he able to protect him?

Then Ciel remembered everything he had read in his file and his resolve strengthened.

“Hello, Finnian,” he said, trying to sound gentle. “My name is Ciel Phantomhive. Did Sebastian explain why we wish to hire you?”

“Yes,” the boy stared at him and to Ciel’s concern, his terror didn’t seem to dissipate. “But I told him, I don’t think I can be of any use to you.”

“Finnian—”

“Finnie. Please call me Finnie. That’s my name. I…” Finnie touched the back of his neck and flinched. “I don’t like my full name.”

“Of course. Finnian,” Ciel contemplated him for a second, trying to decide how to proceed. One glance at Sebastian showed that he was completely mystified himself and thus useless.

Well, what had he expected?

“I won’t force you to work for me,” Ciel said finally. “If you want to leave, you can do that right now. But where would you go? Do you have a family?”

“…No,” Finnie wrapped his hands around himself, biting his lip. “But I can’t stay here. I don’t want to be locked up. I don’t want to kill anymore, not my friends, not anyone. Never again.”

Now this, Ciel could work with.

“Then you might want to reconsider,” he said. “We have a position of a gardener. It’ll be spring soon and there is a big garden in front of the house — you could take care of it. It means that you’ll be able to spend the majority of your time outside. Also, no one is going to lock you up. I give you my word. As for killing… Would you be ready to kill to protect yourself or your friends?”

“I… yes. Yes, I might do that. But I don’t have any friends.”

“You have one now,” Ciel made himself smile in the friendliest way possible, though Sebastian’s snort nearly ruined his concentration. “And you’ll have other friends here,” he hastened to assure. “You’re not the only person we’re hiring. I hope that together, you will all grow to love this place and you’ll want to protect it.”

“Someone is attacking you?” Finnie made one hesitant step towards him and Ciel continued smiling, relieved and encouraged by this reaction.

“Yes,” he said. Briefly, he wondered what part of the story to share this time to secure his success.

Doing it was harder than he had expected. He didn’t want to think about it, to share even a small piece of his past with anyone other than Sebastian, who already knew it all.

But for building trust, he had to do it. He had done it with Mey-Rin, he could do it with Finnie.
Especially with him.

“I was also locked up,” Ciel murmured quietly and was rewarded by Finnie’s gasp. “For a long time. I couldn’t see anything for the majority of the day, and when the room was lit—” He nearly tripped here but quickly managed to go on, “I wished I could go back to the darkness.”

“Were people who did this to you caught?”

“No,” it took Ciel all efforts to avoid glancing at Sebastian. It wasn’t exactly a lie. “They weren’t caught. Some of them continue to attack me and my home. That’s why I need your help. You can work in the garden and do what you want in your free time, but when the danger comes, I’d like you to help eliminate it.”

Ciel waited for response, watching how hope bloomed in Finnie’s eyes before suddenly transforming back into despair. With a short cry, Finnie dropped to his knees, crashing his fists against the floor.

“I can’t!” he cried out. “I can’t control my strength. I bring only troubles. When I was in my cell, I had a bird. A little bird who kept visiting me, the only one who… But when I tried to pat it, it died. It fell apart right in my hands! I can’t trust myself and you can’t trust me, too! I could hurt you!”

Finnie’s shoulders began to shake and for a second, Ciel was filled with a reckless desire to leave the room and let Sebastian console him.

He couldn’t do it. What did he know about comforting anyone? The books Sebastian assigned him to read gave him an idea of how to carry out complicated conversations, but he hadn’t had a chance to gain an actual practical experience with all kinds of them. He wasn’t good at it.

Ciel looked at Sebastian, ready to order him to persuade Finnie in whatever way he could, but he was stricken by an emotionless, blank expression on his face.

Sebastian was bored. Only his position and his appreciation for aesthetics probably stopped him from yawning.

Would he be able to even pretend to be understanding? Sebastian was hopeless when it came to emotions. No matter how many times Ciel woke up from his nightmares, Sebastian was there, but he clearly wanted to leave as soon as possible. When the memories were too overwhelming to brush them off and Ciel asked him to stay, Sebastian tended to take a guarding position next to the window, far away from the bed, impersonal, professional, and bored.

Regardless of Ciel’s turmoil, even he could do better than that. Leaving overemotional Finnie in Sebastian’s care wasn’t an option.

Taking a deep breath, Ciel approached Finnie and lowered himself to his knees, mirroring his posture. Then he held out his hand.

“Here,” he said. “Take it.”

“Young Master!” Sebastian suddenly came back to life, making several hurried steps towards them. “What are you doing?”

Ciel ignored him, focusing on Finnie’s wide-eyed stare.

“Take my hand,” he said again. “Don’t be scared.”
“But I’ll hurt you!”

“Do it carefully, then. Touch my hand with one finger.”

Finnie raised his trembling hand and hesitantly pressed his finger against Ciel’s palm. It didn’t feel uncomfortable, so Ciel smiled encouragingly.

“Good,” he said. “Now add another one.”

“Young Master!” Sebastian protested again and Ciel growled, “Quiet!”

Finnie stared at their hands for a while before slowly outstretching his second finger. Ciel moved his palm so both fingers would be lying on its inner side and offered, “Now try to press lightly.”

Finnie nodded, hesitated, then nodded again and pressed — and before Ciel knew it, his hand crashed against the floor. Involuntarily, he let out a surprised sound, and the next second Sebastian grabbed him and jumped away from Finnie, holding him protectively.

“I’m sorry!” Finnie’s eyes immediately filled with tears and Ciel, uncaring of how it looked, kicked Sebastian in the shin.

“Let me go!” he hissed. “You idiot, you’re ruining everything!”

“But–”

“Let me go this instant, it’s an order!”

Sebastian loosened his hold reluctantly and Ciel adjusted his jacket before going back to Finnie.

“It’s all right,” he assured him. “Let’s try this again, but this time, try to be gentler. Do you remember how much pressure you applied? Now try to decrease it a bit.”

Finnie took a trembling breath but nodded. Sebastian also joined them, hovering over Ciel, but at least he was silent now.

Finnie put two of fingers on Ciel’s palm and pressed against it. His hand went down again but it didn’t reach the floor, so Ciel allowed himself another smile.

“Not bad,” he noted. “Let’s do it again. Even less pressure this time.”

By the time Finnie risked to actually squeeze his hand, Sebastian looked ready to grab him and take him back to where he’d found him. Ciel was tired but pleased, and hope returned to Finnie’s eyes, burning brighter and brighter with every second.

“Good,” Ciel concluded finally. “We’ll give you a few things that you’d be able to use for practice. But now that the hardest part is over, I’m sure it’ll be easier for you. Oh, and by the way…” Ciel returned to his table and took a round straw hat from it. “Here. It’s for you. It’ll go well with your work in the garden and it’ll hide your scar — if you want it hidden.”

“Yes!” Tears were long gone from Finnie’s face. Now, it was almost glowing. “I don’t know how to thank you, Young Master. I never even dreamed that something like this would be possible for me.”

Before Ciel could reply, Finnie rushed towards him and pressed his head against his shoulder as
carefully as he could, without raising his hands.

“Thank you,” Finnie whispered and Ciel patted him on the back awkwardly, embarrassed and mortified. He could see Sebastian watching them intently, probably getting ready to drag him away again if he detected any kind of danger.

Honestly.

Ciel summoned Mey-Rin and sent Finnie with her, and when they both disappeared, he dropped onto his armchair, more exhausted than ever.

“This day is endless,” he complained. Sebastian tsked, approaching and taking his bruised hand.

“It was utterly reckless of you, Master,” he informed him, displeasure brimming in his voice. “He can’t control himself yet. What if he had broken your hand?”

“Well, you would have stopped him then, wouldn’t you?” Ciel said with false seriousness, almost smirking at how indignant Sebastian looked for a moment.

“But you didn’t let me interfere!”

“As you can see, everything went fine. More than fine.”

“Your hand is bruised quite severely,” Sebastian frowned but Ciel shrugged dismissively.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “The bruises will heal but Finnie will never forget this experience. He will accept everything that we offered and he will be loyal to me.”

“He is still dangerous. I believe you should limit your contact with him until he learns better control.”

“Then help him learn it. You have similar abilities, you are also strong enough to crush a living being in your hands. I’ve seen you do it. So give him some tips. You’re a butler, the servants are your responsibility.”

“As you wish,” Sebastian bowed, the calculating light returning to his eyes.

If Ciel was less tired, he would have felt sorry for Mey-Rin and Finnie. As it was, he just glanced at the clock despondently, wishing he could go to bed right now.

First, though, he had some letters to reply to.

***

Next afternoon, there was an unexpected knock on his office door. For a second, Ciel felt a twinge of depression at the thought that there were more people in his house now that he had to interact with, but then he shook his head.
It was for the better. He’d try to be cordial for the first several weeks, maybe a month, and then, hopefully, the servants would learn their place and wouldn’t bother him. Breakfast hadn’t been so bad today — he’d seen neither Mey-Rin nor Finnie, but now, apparently, one of them wanted to talk.

“Enter,” he said. The door opened and Sebastian stepped inside, and Ciel raised his eyebrows, surprised.

That knock didn’t sound like Sebastian’s, not to mention that Sebastian never waited for his permission to enter. What could it be about?

“Master, there is someone here to see you about the job.”

“The job?” Ciel gaped. Sebastian sent him a mischievous look before stepping away and letting a tall, blond man come inside. He looked familiar and it took Ciel a moment to recognize him as Baldroy, the soldier from the file Sebastian had shown to him.

He couldn’t recall giving Sebastian an order to test or hire him. He had clearly expressed that he wasn’t overly interested in Baldroy in the first place. What the hell had given Sebastian an idea that he could act so freely and so boldly? Bringing anyone here without his permission! Without even warning him!

“Uhm, hi?” Baldroy waved and then hunched his shoulders, looking as uncomfortable as Ciel felt angry. “I was told you need my services?”

You’re a butler, the servants are your responsibility.

That’s what it was. That infuriating demon had once again twisted his words to hire a person he himself was interested in.

Ciel glowered at Sebastian, aching with desire to throw something heavy at him. What was he supposed to do with Baldroy now? Send him away? That would serve Sebastian right.

But if Sebastian was so obsessed with the idea of hiring him, then maybe there was something Ciel was missing?

“Yes,” he said aloud. “My name is Ciel Phantomhive. This house belongs to me and I have been looking for someone who would be able to protect it.”

Baldroy, who had started to look more and more miserable, cheered up and even smiled.

“Nice to meet you!” he exclaimed. “The butler here told me that it’s a double position. I can do lots of things. I can do repairs, make weapons, shoot, devise strategies, both defensive and attack ones... Oh, and I’m a great cook! So whatever you need, I can probably do it!”

Ciel sent Sebastian a sceptical glance, still wishing to hit him with something.

Baldroy sounded enthusiastic but it was all that Ciel saw in him. A good soldier. A nice person. What was it that held Sebastian’s attention?

Sebastian grinned at him, and before Ciel could comprehend what’s going on, he struck. His hand moved towards Baldroy’s head at lightning speed, with the force that could only be deadly, and at this very moment Baldroy suddenly tilted his head and cracked his neck, letting out a frustrated noise.
“Sorry,” he said apologetically. “The trip here was tiresome.”

Ciel stared at him with his mouth agape, unable to believe what had just happened.

Intuition that Sebastian had mentioned? Could it really be this strong? To avoid death so effectively but without even noticing anything…

It changed things. It changed everything. If Baldroy could sense the danger so well, he’d be able to devise the most effective strategies.

His small army would be practically undefeatable.

“You’re hired,” Ciel said, clearing his throat. Maybe he didn’t feel any connection with Baldroy, but he wasn’t a fool. He could adequately evaluate and appreciate the potential usefulness. “Go to the first floor. My butler will join you in a moment and introduce you to everyone else.”

“Great!” Baldroy beamed at him. He squared his shoulders confidently and bowed in the most awkward way Ciel had ever seen. “I promise, you won’t regret it!”

“My, my, Young Master,” Sebastian drawled when the loud footsteps faded. “That was much less intricate than your attempts with Mey-Rin and Finnie. Are you losing your touch?”

“Bastard!” Ciel growled, jumping from his seat. “How dare you act by yourself? I didn’t give you any orders about Baldroy! At the very least, you could have warned me!”

“You said that I am responsible for the servants,” Sebastian pressed his hand to his chest. Did he really think he looked more sincere this way? As if Ciel couldn’t see right through him. “I knew Baldroy would be a valuable addition to the household. Human intuition is a fascinating thing. I wonder—”

Without letting him finish, Ciel took an inkwell, opened it, and poured tea inside. Even without looking up, he could tell that Sebastian stared at him, probably trying to guess what he was doing.

Calmly, Ciel stirred the horrid mixture and then threw the inkwell at Sebastian’s head. As he’d expected, Sebastian caught it automatically, but dark splashes managed to stain the green carpet, his face, and even his clothes. There wasn’t much damage, but Ciel knew how difficult it would be to remove the stains that did form.

“The carpet, Master!” Sebastian looked at the dirty marks with obvious despondency, probably imagining how much more tedious work had just appeared in his to-do list.

“Go and help Baldroy. Introduce him to everyone, answer the questions he might have, show him his room. Then come back here and clean this mess.”

“But the ink will have dried by that time—”

“Then you’ll have to be especially thorough,” Ciel cut him off. “I don’t want to see even one dark spot. And no demonic power. Do it the human way.”

Sebastian grimaced as if he had just been assigned the most unpleasant thing to do. He was lucky that it wasn’t warm yet or Ciel would have ordered him to plant several hundreds of white roses manually, forbidding him to use his demonic speed and strength. Now that would be an appropriate punishment.

Holding his head high, he left the room, pretending that he didn’t see how Sebastian was downright
pouting, still observing the damage.

Stupid demon.

***

It seemed that every new day in his house was becoming more and more unpredictable. Next morning, when Ciel was already at the table, waiting to be served breakfast, the only thing he heard was silence. No Sebastian. No Tanaka. No servants. Usually, he wouldn’t have minded, but his breakfast was already seven minutes late and Sebastian didn’t even come to explain why.

That never happened before. What was going on?

One more minute passed and Ciel huffed, frustrated. He started to say Sebastian’s name when suddenly, there was a loud crash from the kitchen, followed by yelps, screams, and sounds of the breaking glass.

Horrified, Ciel got up, trying to decide whether he had to go and investigate or wait here. Before he even approached the door, though, Sebastian finally came — he practically jumped from the kitchen, pushing the door close and giving him one of the most charming and innocent smiles Ciel had ever seen on him.

“I apologise, Master,” he uttered. “Please, go to your study room. I’ll bring your breakfast there in several minutes.”

Ciel narrowed his eyes, studying him critically. Sebastian didn’t have his tuxedo jacket on and he was all covered in soot — no matter how normally he tried to look, something was clearly wrong.

“What happened?” Ciel asked. Sebastian sighed, as if the mere need to reply pained him.

“I hate to say it, Young Master, but unfortunately, it appears that our new servants are idiots. All of them.”

“Idiots?” Ciel repeated incredulously. “And you’re saying it now, after we hired them?”

“Well, their defense abilities are exemplary, which was our main goal. But regarding cleaning, cooking, and helping with chores…”

There was another loud crash, once again followed by yelps, and Ciel pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation.

“Idiots,” he repeated again. “Yes. I can see that.”

“I’m sorry, Master,” for once, Sebastian did look apologetic. “I made a grave mistake when I entrusted them with such important preparations. I’ll make your breakfast myself.”

“Fine, but hurry up. I’m hungry.”
Sebastian bowed and hastened to disappear behind the kitchen door again, careful to hide whatever ruins were there from Ciel.

What had his house been turned into?

Upset and hungry, Ciel went to his office, and froze as soon as he saw the letter from the Queen on top of his daily correspondence.

Curious, he opened it and began to read.

By the time he finished, he no longer wanted any breakfast.

**

“Are you sure it was a good idea to take those three with us to London?” Ciel asked. Their carriage had just dropped Mey-Rin, Finnie, and Baldroy at the house and headed towards the crime scene that the Queen wanted him to visit.

“Yes.” Contrary to his words, Sebastian didn’t look thrilled with the idea. “The first weeks of education are crucial and I have to make sure they learn at least the basic skills. Leaving them at the house without supervision at this point is dangerous.”

That Ciel couldn’t argue with. He only hoped that during their absence, the manor with Tanaka wouldn’t be attacked and that his London house would survive the combination of Mey-Rin, Finnie, and Baldroy.

Honestly, even Sebastian wasn’t that hopeless when he had just started performing his duties.

“How many bodies have been found so far?” Sebastian asked and Ciel’s thoughts came to an abrupt halt.

“Six,” he said grimly. “The one we’re going to see now is the seventh. All children from eight to thirteen: five boys and two girls. All drugged, violated, and strangled.”

Sebastian said nothing but Ciel could feel his attentive, assessing stare. He tried to ignore it, focusing on the streets they were passing instead.

Someone was evidently determined to plunge him back into the darkness he had managed to crawl up from. First Mey-Rin and Finnie with whom he had to share the bits of his past. Now this case, where the nightmarish visions would undoubtedly try to weaken his resolve.

He wouldn’t let them. He would do his job as efficiently as always and then he would go home and try to forget this case ever happened.

The carriage finally stopped. Ciel waited for Sebastian to open the door for him and got down, feeling how his heart began to speed up but determined to ignore it.

There were several police officers guarding the entrance to the basement of an old building. One
tall man with grey hair and spectacles immediately drew his attention. Ciel recalled the blurry pictures of him from the newspapers — Lord Arthur Randall, a police commissioner of the Scotland Yard.

When he and Sebastian approached, Randall glanced at him in disinterest and then did a double-take, staring at his ring.

“Phantomhive?” he asked, and the doubt in his voice made Ciel bristle.

“It’s Earl Phantomhive,” he said coldly. “I’ve come to see the crime scene. I trust it you’ve kept it secured?”

Ciel could see how Randall reacted to his tone, narrowing his eyes and squaring his shoulders confrontationally.

“I need to see the evidence that you are who you say you are,” he uttered through gritted teeth.

“Is my family ring not enough?”

“You could have stolen it from the real Earl.”

Ciel snorted.

“I am the real Earl,” he said hauntingly, snatching the Queen’s letter from his coat and waving it in front of Randall’s face derisively. “Now show me the body. You’ve wasted enough of my time.”

Randall and the officers who stood next to him all stared at him with various degrees of turmoil and Ciel barely hid a smirk.

It never failed to be amusing, seeing how others reacted to him. They were all misled by his age and his appearance, and proving them wrong was immensely satisfying.

He had been the child they expected him to be once, but that child had died more than a year ago.

“And who is that?” Randall looked at Sebastian suspiciously.

“Sebastian Michaelis, my butler,” Ciel stared into Randall’s face intently to solidify the point he was making. “He goes where I go.”

“I wasn’t informed of—”

“Enough! Show me the body.”

“Be my guest — if you can stomach it.”

Privately, Ciel wasn’t sure he could, but after these words, he had no other choice.

He followed Randall down the basement, carefully measuring each of his breaths.

He wasn’t going to react to whatever was waiting for him there. He would remain strong. He had already seen dead bodies before — the fact that it was children now, and those who had been violated prior to death, didn’t change anything.

Ciel kept repeating these words like mantra, again and again, forcefully stopping his breathing from growing laboured. Only slow, deep breaths, three and a half seconds between each of them.
When he saw the half-naked body of a boy, though, with his wide, glassy eyes and bare legs stained with blood and other fluids, all air was crushed right out of his lungs. A wave of nausea rolled up, almost making him heave, and for a moment, the world flickered, mixing the past and the present, destroying his understanding of where he was now.

Then Sebastian’s gloved fingers brushed against his neck slightly, and the cool touch instantly made the world regain its contours. From the outside, it must have looked like Sebastian was adjusting his collar, but this fleeting touch was startlingly personal — it was enough to ground him.

Ciel could still taste the vomit, felt it caked around his mouth, but his voice was steady when he said, “The victim is dressed in a coat that’s too light for such weather. It also looks cheap, so he can’t be from a wealthy family. Was his identity established?”

“Not yet,” Randall replied, looking sour. He was probably disappointed that Ciel hadn’t run from the scene screaming.

Ciel smiled with the corner of his lips and shared a quick look with Sebastian, who wore an equally satisfied smirk.

“What about others?” Ciel turned to Randall again. “Was anyone identified or are you too incompetent to do even that?”

“Now listen here, you…” Randall bit back an obvious curse. “Our investigation was going well without you. No one here needs your ‘help’, or whatever it is you’re offering.”

“The Queen clearly thinks differently or she wouldn’t have asked me to come,” Ciel retorted and was treated to a lovely sight of Randall’s face growing red with anger. “Do answer my question.”

“Only three have been identified. All of them were from East End. Not that their families were looking for them. That sort of people—”

“East End. It’s my district, why wasn’t I informed sooner?”

Randall glowered at him.

“As I said,” he spat, “we were doing fine without you.”

“Yes, I can see that.” Ciel focused on the body again, careful not to look at the boy’s lower half. Taking a deep breath, he stepped closer and bent down, checking the pockets of the boy’s coat. His fingers immediately grasped something soft, and when he pulled the object out, he was astonished to realise it was a small stuffed elephant produced by his own company.

Ciel stood up, showing the toy to Sebastian. The silent gaze they exchanged told him that Sebastian had the exact same thought: the toy was a lure.

“The Queen mentioned these children were drugged before death,” Ciel said aloud. “What is this drug? Is it expensive?”

“What does its price have to do with anything?”

Sebastian snorted quietly and Ciel lowered his head to hide a smile.

“It’s quite simple, Lord Randall,” he uttered. “Do you see this toy? It’s one of the Funtom Corporation’s products. I assure you that children from East End wouldn’t be able to afford it.”
“So he stole it from someone. Although I cannot imagine why he would bother, it’s such an ugly toy.”

“This toy has been developed specifically for India,” Sebastian intervened suddenly and Ciel glanced at him, surprised. To his amazement, Sebastian almost looked insulted — his eyes were redder than normal as he stared at Randall. “It’s a top choice among Indian children.”

“Indians!” Randall scoffed. “I’m not surprised. And it doesn’t explain anything, so what’s your point?”

“Considering your attempt at deflection, I assume you have failed to identify the drug, either,” Ciel summarised. “Was there anything you did do? Apart from finding the bodies.”

“We conducted an analysis of the drug,” Randall barked, clenching his fists as if to hold himself from striking him. His reactions were so amusing that they successfully managed to distract Ciel from the body.

He’d thought that it would be harder to rattle someone like Randall.

“And? What did it show?”

Randall grimaced and then reluctantly pulled out a file form his coat. Ciel grabbed it, opened it, and pretended that he understood what was written there.

“All right, I’ve seen everything I needed,” he said condescendingly. “Come, Sebastian. We’re leaving.”

“What?” Randall’s face turned red again. “And that’s it? My people were forced to wait for your arrival for hours just so you could check the boy’s pockets and steal my file?”

“The toy I found in his pocket told me what I need to know to solve this case. As for the file — why would you need it? You’re clearly incapable of making proper conclusions.”

More than satisfied, Ciel turned on his heel and walked away, knowing that Sebastian was following him.

When they were outside, he inhaled deeply, relieved to be away from that suffocating basement.

“It was impressive, Master,” Sebastian commented. “Although I believe you have just made another enemy.”

“I don’t need him as my friend. He’s incompetent, bigoted, and narrow-minded. I will be able to solve this case myself.”

“How?” Sebastian sounded genuinely intrigued.

“First, we go to Lau. Then…” Ciel broke off when he noticed how Sebastian’s eyes suddenly glazed over and filled with affection. The sight was so rare that he stared at it wide-eyed, unable to comprehend what could possibly lead to such reaction.

Then he noticed a mewling cat and groaned.

“Ah,” Sebastian murmured, making several steps towards it and dropping right to his knees. “What a beauty. You must be hungry, you look so thin…”

“Are you actually talking to it?” Ciel asked in frustration. Sebastian’s strange fixation had been
hilarious the first time, amusing the second time, but by the third, it started to get weird. Now, they had to be on the twentieth cat Sebastian had encountered, yet his reaction remained the same every time.

“Master,” Sebastian turned to him and Ciel cringed at his beseeching expression. It didn’t belong on Sebastian’s face. “May I leave you for just a moment? I’ll be right back.”

“Leave me? Where are you planning to go?”

“I’ll bring this lovely thing something to eat.”

“It’s a cat, Sebastian! It can find food by itself!”

Sebastian’s crestfallen face was too much to tolerate, so Ciel barked, “Fine, leave. I give you thirty seconds.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian bowed and then disappeared. Wherever he had jumped to, he’d done it so quickly that Ciel didn’t even notice him move.

Twelve seconds later he returned, holding something bloody in his hands. The cat mewled happily while Ciel’s jaw dropped.

“What is this thing?” he asked warily. He wouldn’t be surprised if his idiot butler had just dismembered some unfortunate person to feed the cat.

“There is a morgue a few houses from here. One of the bodies was just being delivered and—”

“What?!?” Ciel yelled. “You’ve torn a chunk from the dead body to feed a cat?”

“It was the only thing I could detect nearby. Initially, I considered pigeons but—”

“Never do that again! No tearing pieces from the bodies, what the hell is wrong with you? Ugh!” Ciel turned away, rubbing his throat and trying to swallow the newly rising nausea back. Then he stalked towards the carriage.

Sebastian followed him, still throwing enamoured glances at the cat they were leaving behind.

“You could have chosen animals that I’m not allergic to at least,” Ciel growled.

“From where I’m from—”

“I don’t care where you are from, shut up! That was disgusting!”

Sebastian fell silent, probably affronted, but Ciel didn’t care.

He’d had enough revolting visions for today — and the day was far from over.

***
Lau’s den was filled with toxic smoke, as always, and Ciel had to hold his nose to even walk through it.

“We have to do something about his business,” he croaked. “It’s getting annoying.”

“We have a mutually beneficial agreement with Lau, Master,” Sebastian reminded him. “And he has proven to be quite useful.”


Lau greeted them cordially, with a carefree smile that Ciel could never really decipher.

“Earl,” he drawled. “I have been wondering when you were going to visit me. With these awful doings…”

“Awful doings?” Ciel frowned. “How can you know what I’m investigating?”

“You’re investigating something?” Lau opened one of his eyes and Ciel growled under his breath.

“Stop doing this,” he hissed. “And yes, I am. I need your advice about this drug. Are you familiar with it?”

This time, Lau opened both eyes, accepting the outstretched file.

“You’ve come to the right person,” he said. “I do know this drug.”

Ciel rolled his eyes.

“If you couldn’t even help with this, I’d start to doubt our cooperation,” he muttered.

“It doesn’t have a name yet,” Lau sent an inscrutable glance to Sebastian before focusing on Ciel again. “It’s unique in our market. Only a select few can afford it.”

“Does it come from India?”

“It does,” Lau returned the file, still gazing at Ciel curiously. “I wonder where you could possibly encounter it, Earl.”

“Someone drugs children with it before killing them.”

“I see,” Lau inhaled the smoke deeply, his face smoothening in pleasure. “Is it all that’s done to them?”

Ciel stiffened.

“No,” he replied slowly and Lau nodded.

“It has an interesting effect, this drug,” he said. “I haven’t used it myself, I’m afraid it’s not entirely my area.”

When he said nothing else, Ciel hurried him, “What kind of effect?”

“Let’s see,” Lau stepped to him and touched his stomach lightly. “You lose all feelings in your body. It depends on the amount of the drug you consume, of course. Smaller dosage will let you move, albeit slowly, but bigger one will leave you paralysed — more or less. Then,” Lau’s fingers went up and pressed against Ciel’s throat, “your breathing slows, your senses begin to leave you
entirely. Your body is still functional but the mind is shutting down. Then—” Lau suddenly removed his hands and grinned. “It’s either the end, the beginning, or the pleasure of both.”

“Right.” That was not confusing at all. “I think this will be enough for us. Let’s go, Sebastian.”

Ciel caught Sebastian giving Lau a long, indecipherable look. He didn’t understand its meaning and at this moment, he didn’t care.

On the street, Ciel greedily sucked in the cold air, letting it soothe his burning lungs.

“Where to now?” Sebastian asked and Ciel grimaced.

“Undertaker,” he said reluctantly. “I want to finish this case tomorrow at the latest. We need to know who among the local nobility has frequent dealings with India and is known in the underworld.”

“He might ask for a payment,” Sebastian warned. “We still don’t know what it is that he requires. Last time, he shared the information for free.”

“Whatever it is he needs, I’m sure we can provide him with it,” Ciel snorted. “It can’t be anything impossible, can it?”

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“Making you laugh!” Ciel yelled. “What kind of payment is that?”

“The only one I accept.”

“Can’t you just take money?”

“What would I need it for?” Undertaker tilted his head, a picture of innocent confusion, and Ciel almost screamed with frustration. This day was an utter nightmare.

“You could have at least warned us! We didn’t come prepared.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. I won’t be able to share anything with you, then. Come by next time.”

“But we need information now! How about—” Ciel thought hastily. “How about you help us for free again and the next time, we’ll pay you double?”


“I’m sure you know plenty,” Ciel hissed before turning to Undertaker again. “So?” he asked confidently. “Do we have a deal?”

“Why, yes,” Undertaker grinned and sat down on one of the coffins, tapping against its surface slowly. His nails scratched it with an annoying sound and Ciel cringed. How could any
representative of such profession have such long nails? And black ones, at that. Obviously they were painted, but the sight was still strange.

“I’ll hold you to it,” Undertaker sing-songed. “What is it that I can help you with? Perhaps you wish to test one of my coffins? They’re of utmost comfort. See for yourself.”

“What? No!” Ciel shuddered. As if he would ever willingly climb into a coffin. “We are looking for a man who has money, close contacts with India, and who might be known for making donations to children’s organisations. Or he might be known for his less than innocent love for children in more criminal circles. Do you have anyone in mind?”

“Ah,” Undertaker’s smile widened and became frustratingly mysterious. “I think I know just what case you’re investigating. The Queen is sending children to find the killers of other children now, is she? What a fascinating strategy. Don’t you think so, butler?” Undertaker looked at Sebastian.

“I wouldn’t know,” Sebastian replied evenly. “Evaluating the wisdom of the Queen’s decisions is not my area of expertise. I’m merely one hell of a butler,” he grinned and Ciel smacked himself on the forehead, not knowing whether to scream or laugh hysterically.

Sebastian loved his stupid joke and tried to use it whenever he had an opportunity. Ciel hadn’t heard it lately and he started to hope that it meant Sebastian had lost interest in it.

Apparently, he was wrong.

Demons had the weirdest sense of humour.

“One hell of a butler, you say?” Undertaker hummed thoughtfully. “Yes, I believe you are.”

“Thank you,” Sebastian bowed a little.

“Enough!” Ciel glared at them both. Who on earth was he cooperating with? “Do you know the man based on the description I’ve given you?”

“I’m ninety three percent certain that you’re talking about Frederick Lyndon,” Undertaker shuddered in an exaggerated manner. “A Count who has bought himself a title not so long ago. He loves products exclusive to India — toys, weapons… drugs,” Undertaker bared his teeth and Ciel couldn’t help but find this smile intimidating. Involuntarily, he made one step towards Sebastian, then forced himself to stop.

“Your help is appreciated,” he said coolly. “Sebastian, we’re leaving.”

“Don’t forget about our deal, Earl Phantomhive,” Undertaker waved at them, smiling normally this time. “I do look forward to your next visit.”

“Young Master, do you want to visit Lyndon right now?” Sebastian asked as they left the parlour, and Ciel shook his head.

“No,” he replied. “I’ve had enough for one day. Let’s go home. And I hope we won’t have to return here any time soon,” Ciel glanced back at the parlour. Undertaker was a disturbing man — who else would take laughter for payment?

“As you wish,” Sebastian opened the door of the carriage for him and Ciel climbed inside, trying not to think about what he would have to do tomorrow.

To visit Lyndon. A man who killed children. A man who violated them.
He survived today, he would survive tomorrow as well. Nightmares be damned.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter and feedback is very appreciated and craved! :)


Hiring. Part 3

Chapter Notes

As promised, a quicker update this time!) Thank you all so much for your amazing support, it takes me aback every time. And since I'm unlikely to update till after the New Year, Merry Christmas, everyone! Hope the next year will be kinder to us all.

WARNING: This chapter features some more detailed references to child rape and death. Also, quite strong PTSD symptoms mentions.

That night, Ciel couldn’t sleep. He tried to force the unpleasant images from his mind but they kept returning, stubborn and acidic, devouring the strength of his resolve.

He didn’t want to have nightmares. Preferably not ever, but at least not tonight. Tomorrow was going to be a difficult day as it was, he didn’t need any additional complications, any reminders that failed to fade from his memory no matter how hard he tried.

The sleep finally came, but as he’d expected, nothing good came with it. The shadows haunted him, whispering things that Ciel tried to ignore, and then, suddenly, he found himself back in his cell, with other children, watching the room and everything happening there.

It’s not real, he thought, but terror already paralysed him, destroying every link to reality he had been clinging to. A tall man in the grey coat stepped towards the cell and started to open the door, and paralysis instantly morphed into half-forgotten, terrified instinct to throw himself into one of the corners, trying to blend in and become invisible. Sobs, cries, and pleas filled the cell, and the man took off his mask, grinning.

“So?” he asked. “Any volunteers?”

Ciel shook in his corner, pushing his knees to his chest as hard as he could. His teeth were chattering and he hoped that the sound wasn’t too loud, that it wouldn’t draw attention to him.

The man grabbed one of the boys and dragged him out, and the boy immediately broke in hysterical screaming, clawing at the hand that held him and trying to get free.

A choked sound of relief and despair left Ciel’s chest and he closed his eyes, praying to God, begging to be saved.

When the boy’s screaming changed into piercing, pained yells, Ciel looked up involuntarily and shuddered when he saw what was being done to him. At another choking gasp, his own eyes filled with tears and he cried, not wanting to be chosen next. His whole body ached, as if it was him being torn in half, and he was filled with a sudden, maddening desire to claw at the walls until they let him out, until he left this place, until he ran and ran, far away from here.

There was one word that could save him. The knowledge of this was intrinsic, but no matter how much Ciel tried, he couldn’t remember it. He recalled the words of all prayers his mother had taught him, but they felt empty and worthless now, when he was confined to this pit of hell.

Several more people took the weakened boy and dragged him to the other corner of the room. The
man in the grey coat walked back to their cell and Ciel began to shake again, knowing, feeling that this time, he was going to be chosen.

To his horror, the man’s eyes did focus on him, and then he moved towards him and Ciel screamed even before he touched him, his mind filling with white-hot, primitive panic.

And then the word came, the only word that made sense, that was powerful enough to put a stop to everything.

Sebastian. How could he forget?


“Sebastian!” Ciel shrieked. “Help me! Sebastian!”

The man finally grabbed him and the touch felt burningly real, more real than the boy’s screams had been, more real than what was still being done to him and what was apparently waiting for Ciel.

He wouldn’t survive it, not again.

“Sebastian!” his voice broke to the point where he no longer recognised it. “Sebastian, please!”

The last word was unfamiliar, almost foreign, and utterly useless. Sebastian didn’t come.

“Sebastian!” Ciel’s scream was so loud and shrilly that it deafened him.

“I’m here,” the man drawled mockingly, still holding him and grinning that half-crazed, lustful smile at him. Ciel shook his head, refusing to believe it.

“Sebastian!” he howled. He didn’t care if calling him was hopeless — this name was the only real prayer he knew.

“I’m here,” the man said again, but this time, his voice sounded achingly familiar. Ciel blinked through his tears and the room changed, transforming into the bedroom of his London house.

Sebastian was kneeling in front of his bed, watching him with confusion and concern. The very sight of him was so heart-stoppingly comforting that Ciel threw his hands around his neck before he could think about it, hiding his face in the familiar black jacket.

“Kill them,” he murmured. “Kill them, Sebastian. Kill them all.”

“I already did, Master.”

“Good,” Ciel inhaled Sebastian’s smell deeply, revelling in the safety it provided. “If they return, you will kill them again, yes?”

“Of course. I will do anything to protect you. Until the very end.”

Ciel nodded and tightened his grip around Sebastian’s neck, pressing even closer to him — and then the reality broke through, bringing an understanding of what happened, of who he was and what he was doing.

A nightmare. Just a simple nightmare, like he’d expected. And instead of dealing with it maturely, like he taught himself, he was clinging to the demon who would only mock his weakness, despise him for it.
Unless he had to carry him, Sebastian never held him back. The thought clearly never even occurred to him, so why Ciel’s mind saw him as the source of physical comfort was beyond his ability to understand.

He hesitated, strangely unwilling to let go even if his consciousness had returned to him, and Sebastian suddenly raised his hand and touched his back once, then twice, in a slow, hesitant caress.

For a moment, Ciel was too stunned to react. His shock began to melt into disbelief, then into stupor, and then he recalled how he himself had been comforting Finnie just a few days ago, right in front of Sebastian.

Sebastian was mirroring him, repeating his own movements, even preserving the awkwardness with which Ciel had stroked Finnie’s back.

The knowledge felt surreal. Shocking.

And yes, it probably didn’t mean anything to Sebastian, but his attempt at comfort, whatever provoked it and whatever personal gain was hiding underneath, did mean something to Ciel.

Maybe he could allow himself to enjoy it. Just tonight. Just for an hour.

Ciel shifted, pressing his chin against Sebastian’s shoulder and taking another deep breath, slowly calming under the cool, soothing touches. Something at the door attracted his attention, though, and when he looked up, he saw Finnie’s, Mey-Rin’s, and Baldroy’s pale faces.

Sebastian had forgotten to close the door. Had he been hurrying in response to Ciel’s screams or had he done it deliberately?

For some reason, Ciel doubted it was the latter, but fury and embarrassment still crashed into him, and the touch that had seem so comforting just a moment ago suddenly became a brand of weakness and helplessness.

“Don’t touch me!” he hissed and pushed Sebastian away with all his strength. For a brief second, something akin to confusion and embarrassment flickered across Sebastian’s face, but it disappeared just as quickly, replaced by the usual coldness.

“And you,” Ciel turned to stare at the servants again. “Get out! Now! NOW!”

All three gasped and obeyed immediately, but it was already too late. They had already seen that sickening display of weakness. They’d never look at him like he had wanted them to.

“How could you not close the door, you idiot!” Ciel spat, glaring at Sebastian. He had to clench the blanket in his fists to keep himself from lashing out physically. “What, you can’t do two tasks at once? What kind of butler are you?”

“I apologise, my lord,” Sebastian bowed, but this impersonal demonstration did nothing to soothe Ciel’s rising rage.

“I don’t want you to apologise! I want you to stop making mistakes and stop embarrassing me!”

Ciel regretted his words as soon as he saw the mocking gaze Sebastian gave him. He almost heard him say, “You’ve embarrassed yourself,” and even if this accusation didn’t sound aloud, he still knew it was true.
He was the one to get scared because of some nightmare. He was the one who had latched onto Sebastian and refused to let go.

“Get out,” Ciel ordered, quieter this time. “I don’t want to see you for the rest of the night.”

Sebastian’s lips thinned but he nodded and left, this time closing the door properly.

The room immediately felt empty. Ciel shivered, wrapping the blanket around himself. The clock showed half past three — he still had some time to sleep, but even looking at his pillow filled him with dread.

He didn’t need sleep tonight. Those several hours he had already wasted on it would have to suffice.

Ciel left his bed and walked to the window. A chess table stood there, the game prepared yet still untouched.

It had been ages since he had played chess. The game always fascinated him but he rarely had patience to see it through. It had seemed wasteful to spend a lot of time on it when so many more entertaining activities waited for him. Now, though?

Ciel took a seat, watching the pieces thoughtfully, his eyes finally focusing on the king.

The most important chess piece that refrained from active actions for the majority of time. An observer who gained utmost relevance only towards the end of the game.

Symbolic. Almost ridiculously so.

Maybe he should practice his victory — and his inevitable demise. Playing against himself wasn’t going to provide him with a productive game but it could be a start. Later, he could use Sebastian as his opponent, and if — no, when he managed to beat him, he would be able to beat anyone.

Comforted by this thought, Ciel chose his first piece and lost himself in the game.

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During breakfast, Ciel still didn’t feel sleepy in the slightest, and although his temples began to pulse painfully, it was most likely in reaction to their upcoming trip.

Sebastian hadn’t said much to him this morning. Was he actually insulted by Ciel pushing him away at night and telling him to leave? Since when did such trivialities offend him?

Sebastian was annoying whenever he was in one of his moods so Ciel steadily ignored him. His breakfast was served by Mey-Rin and Finnie, with Sebastian closely monitoring them, and since nothing was dropped and no one looked at him differently after tonight, he began to feel optimistic.
Until he noticed that Mey-Rin had brought wine and started to pour an entire glass for him.

“What is this?” Ciel demanded. “Why would I think I’d drink wine for breakfast? An entire glass of it!”

“Oh, Young Master, I’m so sorry!” Mey-Rin recoiled and her hands began to shake. “I didn’t, didn’t think, not at all. I’ll take it back to the kitchen!”

“No, wait—” Ciel knew how it was going to end even before it happened. Mey-Rin tried to grab the glass of wine and missed it, knocking it over instead. The red liquid spilled across the white tablecloth. Ciel jumped from his chair to save his clothes and then stared at the table, feeling a familiar sensation of his mind slowing down before coming to an abrupt halt.

In this dim lighting, it was easy to confuse wine with blood. Blood staining the table, the pool growing bigger as more children were sacrificed. Then being cleaned — only to spill again the next day.

He must have made some sort of sound because Sebastian’s eyes focused on him, attentive and amused.

“Come, now, Young Master,” he drawled derisively. “It is merely wine. Surely you don’t expect it to pose any danger to you?”

Ciel flinched from the viciousness of it, absurdly wounded and humiliated. His heart still tried to climb up his throat, making breathing and thinking difficult, but he opened his mouth anyway to retort when Baldroy exclaimed, “Hey, don’t talk to him like that!”

Both Ciel and Sebastian stared at him. Baldroy glowered at Sebastian before walking to Ciel and casually squeezing his shoulder.

“It’s all right,” he said, and when Ciel was about to explode and start yelling at him, he added, “It happens to me, too.”

At this, Ciel found himself at the loss for words. Baldroy must have interpreted it as doubt because he repeated, “It sure happens to me. The memories wake up and you can’t tell what’s real and what’s not. I was at the battlefield, you know, I saw many people die. Saw my friends die. It messes with your head. I can be smoking a cig outside and then I see myself back at the field, surrounded by the dead. There is no controlling that. Those who haven’t lived through it wouldn’t understand, aye, butler?” Baldroy glared at Sebastian who just looked back at him sourly.

Ciel briefly considered denying that he’d been in any way affected, but then he recalled Sebastian remarking how his approach to Baldroy hadn’t been intricate enough and changed his mind.

If his humiliation was needed to establish trust between them, then so be it.

“Thank you, Baldroy,” he forced himself to say, watching how surprise and pleasure crossed his servant’s face.

“Never mind that!” he said enthusiastically. “And do call me Bard, Young Master. Now, let us clean this up real quick. Mey-Rin, Finnie!”

Intrigued, Ciel observed how Bard easily gained control over others. They managed to remove the glass and the tablecloth, but the plate with his breakfast was dropped in the process, breaking into several pieces.
“This is the epitome of foolishness,” Sebastian stated coldly. “Was there ever a plate that you hadn’t dropped?”

Bard, Finnie, and Mey-Rin all lowered their heads guiltily, looking like scolded children. Ciel’s lips twitched in a mirthless smile.

He couldn’t summon the energy to be angry at them. He was too tired. He was still too upset with Sebastian.

“I’ll serve Young Master his breakfast by myself,” Sebastian concluded. “You three, go to the living room and finish reading the books I’ve assigned. It must teach you at least something.”

“Yeah, about that,” Bard exchanged glances with others before daring to look at Sebastian again. “I’m not that good at reading and Finnie and Mey-Rin can't read at all.”

“Can't read?” Sebastian asked after a pause, and the bewilderment in his voice made Ciel smile again, this time more genuinely. Seeing Sebastian taken aback for whatever reason was always fun. “Well. We can’t have that.”

Bard’s, Finnie’s, and Mey-Rin’s faces fell, but lit up again when Sebastian continued, “I’ll have to give you lessons on reading. The servants of the Phantomhive house cannot be illiterate.”

“Sebastian!” Finnie and Mey-Rin looked like they were about to throw themselves on him in their joy and Sebastian’s eyes widened in alarm. This was obviously not the reaction he had been expecting.

“Later,” Ciel said sharply, although he would have enjoyed seeing how Sebastian would deal with being smothered in double embrace. “Sebastian, I trust it you remember that you and I have work to do.”

“Of course, my lord,” Sebastian sent the last wary glance to Finnie and Mey-Rin before focusing on Ciel entirely. “What did you have in mind?”

Ciel waited until the servants left the room before taking off his rings and thrusting them at Sebastian.

“Here,” he said. “You’re going to wear them.”

“Master?” Sebastian accepted the rings automatically but he looked utterly clueless.

“We’ll have to change places for our visit. Undertaker said that this Lyndon has bought himself a title recently. It means that he’s unlikely to know me, my age, or even about my predecessor’s death. You’ll play the role of Earl Phantomhive who is investigating the crime as per the Queen’s request and who is checking every businessman with ties to India. You have to make it seem like you don’t really suspect him and are visiting him out of obligation, to ask basic questions.”

“You want me to play you?” Mischief and anticipation entered Sebastian’s eyes and Ciel looked at him coldly.

“We don’t have any other choice,” he said. “I can’t go as myself because in this case, unless Lyndon is a complete idiot, he won’t go near me. And we need to use me as a bait.”

Sebastian’s mouth fell open and he stared at him astonishment. Amusement was gone, replaced by surprise and disbelief.
“You wish to be a bait?” he asked slowly. “While your courage is certainly admirable, Master, are you sure you will be able to play your part?”

“Do you have any doubts?”

“You’ve panicked at the sight of a spilled glass of wine just a moment ago. I hardly think that—”

“It’s a good thing that you don’t have to think, then, isn’t it?” Ciel snarled. “You’re my pawn. I’m the one who makes decisions. If I said I can handle it, then I can.”

“As you wish,” Sebastian lowered his head, hiding his eyes from Ciel. It was for the better as Ciel had no desire to know what he was thinking right now. He had been embarrassingly weak during the last twenty four hours and this had to change.

He would prove that he’s capable of handling all kinds of difficulties maturely. Whatever the cost.

Not having his rings on was irksome. Standing outside in clothes that befitted a servant was mortifying. Having Sebastian pose as an Earl, all smug and smartly dressed, was absolutely intolerable.

“Our main task is to learn whether he has this drug,” Ciel said, trying not to sound as upset as he felt. “He is likely to deny it, especially if he’s guilty. My presence will distract him — we’ll be able to tell if he’s the one we need based on his reactions. If he is, you’ll excuse yourself and you’ll search his house. Remember, he mustn’t think that we suspect him.”

“And you are certain that he will react to you even if he’s the killer? Are you so confident in your charms, Master?”

Ciel flushed, sending Sebastian a murderous glare.

“It will be clear,” he hissed. “As soon as you are sure, you will locate the drug in whatever closet he’s hiding it and the case will be over.”

“What if he asks me an unplanned question? Should I be silent?”

“Don’t be an idiot, of course you shouldn’t! Obviously I wouldn’t be able to give you instructions there, so say whatever you think will benefit our investigation most.”

“Understood,” Sebastian sent him a mysterious smile that made Ciel immediately wary.

He didn’t like that smile. It never resulted in anything good.

But there was no time for delays, so he nodded and Sebastian knocked on the door.

Lyndon was a surprisingly tall man around thirty. He greeted them himself, in something that resembled pyjamas, and Ciel started to sneer before he remembered his role.
No actual nobleman would allow himself to be this impolite. Didn’t Lyndon have servants?

“May I help you?” Lyndon asked, and then he glanced at Ciel and his eyes widened. His look changed into something Ciel could easily recognise, something that made him instantly nauseous. He tried to breathe, to stay in the present, but the gaze kept burning holes in him, sending the sickening, clammy fear through his very bones.

Sebastian stepped forward, shielding him from the view.

“Are you Frederick Lyndon?” he asked. Hidden behind his back, Ciel quickly regained his control.

Everything was fine. He could do it.

“Yes,” Lyndon replied finally. “And you are?..”

“I’m Earl Phantomhive,” Sebastian sounded so haughty that Ciel rolled his eyes in exasperation. The bastard was clearly mocking him, trying to imitate his tone of voice. “I’m investigating the case on behalf of Her Majesty. I know you are cooperating with Indian traders, so I’ll have to ask you a few questions.”

“But of course. Come in,” Lyndon moved away, peeking behind Sebastian’s shoulder and giving Ciel another long look. “And who would you be?”

He hadn’t thought of the name!

Ciel opened his mouth to blurt the first thing that came to him when Sebastian interjected smoothly, “It’s Finnian, my servant. I had to take him with me. The other servants will be gone for this weekend and he’s not experienced yet to trust him with my house.”

Finnian? Did Sebastian think it was funny?

“Oh, I understand,” Lyndon laughed. “As you can see, I had to dismiss my servants myself. I have a cook but it’s difficult to trust anyone these days, especially new people.”

They walked into the house and Ciel quickly surveyed the interior. Cheap, with the owner trying to make it look more presentable than it actually was.

Lyndon had either spent all his money on his title or he had other frequent sources of expense.

Ciel took a seat in the armchair that looked less atrocious than the rest of the furniture but jumped back to his feet, flushing, when Sebastian said sharply, “Finnie, stand up. Who told you that you could sit?”

Mortified, Ciel murmured an apology, hanging his head and hoping it would pass for regret.

His role wasn’t that difficult. Why was he failing?

“Do forgive his manners,” Sebastian turned back to Lyndon. “I found him in the midst of the winter, when he was on the brink of death. Such a small, pathetic thing — I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him, so I took him home and tried to nurture him back to health.”

Ciel gritted his teeth, forcing himself to count to ten in his head to calm down. Sebastian gave him an amused glance before sighing theatrically.

“Unfortunately, he is not very bright,” he uttered sorrowfully. “I still can’t find any use for him. He fails at everything he tries to do.”
This time, Ciel had to count to twenty before he trusted himself enough to look at Sebastian and not try to murder him.

“Did you do a good thing by saving him,” Lyndon encouraged. His shoulders relaxed and he smiled more genuinely, probably deciding that if Sebastian was sharing something personal with him, he wasn’t a suspect. “Children are precious.”

Ciel stared at him and Lyndon, having caught his gaze, smiled wider.

“What is the case you’re investigating?” he asked.

“I’m afraid I cannot share the details with you. They are confidential.”

“But why did you decide to come to me?”

“Her Majesty,” Sebastian drawled, and Ciel wanted to hit him from how falsely adoring he sounded, “thinks that the perpetrator has close connections with India.”

“I wouldn’t say I have close ties with that country,” Lyndon laughed again, but this time, the sound was fake. “I’m just purchasing some toys from there for children. Charity and all.”

“Count Lyndon, may I be frank with you?” Sebastian leaned closer, lowering his voice. “I have no desire to bother noblemen like you. I’m sure that whomever the perpetrator is, he is among the East End dwellers, maybe even the Indians themselves. But the Queen,” Sebastian filled his words with mocking reverence again, “wishes for me to eliminate any chance that my suspicions might be incorrect.”

“I understand,” Lyndon relaxed again. “So, your visit is more for appearance’s sake?”

At this point, Ciel finally prepared himself enough for an act. With a sigh, he leaned against the chair, tilting his head and massaging his neck slowly, and with the corner of his eye, he saw how Lyndon drew in a sharp breath, staring at him and not looking away.

Sebastian’s lips stretched in an eerie, close-lipped smile.

“Yes, it is,” he said, and if Ciel hadn’t heard him speak in this exact tone before, he probably wouldn’t have recognised the seductive deadliness of it. “I apologise, may I use your washroom?”

Anticipation lit up anxiety and excitement in him and Ciel tensed, knowing what those words signified.

He would have to spend some time alone with Lyndon. But it also meant that this meeting was coming to an end because he had no doubts that Lyndon was the murderer they needed. He had to keep the drug somewhere in his house, and once Sebastian found it, the case would be closed.

Lyndon’s eyes stopped at him again, offensive and admiring. The weight of his stare felt almost physical but fighting the onslaught of memories was easier now that he knew the end was close.

“Finnian,” Lyndon said, and Ciel struggled to keep his face impassive. “How old are you?”

As if it matters to you, Ciel thought darkly.

“Twelve,” he said aloud and Lyndon nodded.

“I thought so. You look just about this age. Does your Master treat you well?”
“He is most kind,” Ciel had to force every word out, knowing that Sebastian was undoubtedly listening and enjoying it. “Although he’s lazy and incompetent,” he added. “He even hired other people to handle his own responsibilities and failed to educate them prior to that.”

“How interesting,” Lyndon took several unhurried steps to him, still devouring him with his gaze. “Quite bold of you to speak that way of your Master. What would he do to you if he heard you?”

He stepped even closer. Rage and disgust threatened to overflow his bowl of self-control, but Ciel still managed to keep his mask on.

“Did he do it to your eye?” Lyndon closed the distance between them, raising his hand, and Ciel flinched from the sudden burst of fear, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to bear this man’s filthy touch yet that he also couldn’t strike by himself, not until Sebastian arrived.

Then Sebastian cleared his throat behind them and Ciel nearly staggered from relief.

Finally. It was over.

As soon as he saw Sebastian’s face, though, he tensed again.

Sebastian didn’t look like the case was finished.

“So, Count, may I ask you several questions? Where were you yesterday in the morning?” he asked, as carelessly as if nothing happened.

Ciel listened to useless questions and even more useless answers, growing more anxious by the second.

Something was wrong. Why was Sebastian continuing this game? Was it possible that he hadn’t found the drug? It couldn’t be it, could it?

“That would be enough,” Sebastian uttered at last. “I don’t think the Queen will have any questions for you.”

“It’s good to know it,” Lyndon grinned and glanced briefly at Ciel. “If you ever need anything else, the door of my house will be open for you — and for Finnian, of course.”

“Oh?” Sebastian raised a sceptical eyebrow. “His lack of grace doesn’t appal you?”

“Not at all. Children are lovely and innocent creatures. Sometimes, to achieve their full potential, they simply need a little push. Some warmth, some understanding.”

“You must have experience in such matters,” Sebastian tilted his head and his lips curled in a smile that Ciel could only call malicious. “Do you think you could teach Finnie something? As your servants are away, I could leave him with you for several days. Maybe a change of places will make him more organised. In fact, I would be grateful if you accepted him — he could help your cook while I’m gone. I will pay you, of course, and I assure you, my payments are always generous.”

For a second, Ciel was caught between shock and disbelief, unable to speak or to even think. Then horror came, fuelled by the sense of betrayal so intense that it blinded him temporarily, filling his head with white noise.

Sebastian couldn’t have just said it. Surely even he wasn’t demonic enough to suggest…
“Oh, I’d love to!” Lyndon’s palpable elation almost made Ciel vomit right then and there. “It will be an honour for me to assist you, Earl. I promise I’ll take the best care of him.”

“Then it’s decided,” Sebastian sent him a fleeting smile and focused his attention on Ciel. His gaze was expectant, as if he was waiting for Ciel to say something.

What? What could he possibly say without screaming and without throwing every curse word he knew at Sebastian?

How could he do that to him?

“I’ll be going,” Sebastian said, still staring at him. He spoke slowly, as if giving Ciel time to react. Did he think it was another game?

Game.

The wheels in Ciel’s head began to turn again, and even though he could feel tremors vibrating through him, weakening his already shaky self-control, somehow, he managed to stand up straighter.

It was a game all right. Sebastian must have been sure that he would be shaken enough to break down, to abandon the investigation in his panic after his ‘offer’. But to risk doing something as outrageous, he must have actually failed to find the drug — otherwise, he would have had no choice but to obey Ciel’s initial order.

And if the investigation wasn’t finished, then Ciel would do whatever was necessary to complete it. Disregarding the implications of such betrayal, the bastard’s plan wasn’t that bad.

“I will do my best to please you, Count Lyndon,” Ciel said as calmly as he could. He was rewarded by Sebastian’s eyes growing wide in shock. The bastard almost backed away, clearly stunned and unsure now that his plan had failed.

“You were leaving, weren’t you? Master?” Ciel drawled, staring at him in contempt. Sebastian nodded slowly, still hesitating, so Ciel turned to Lyndon.

“I will see him out,” he said politely. “If I’m to be your servant, I’ll prefer to start right away.”

“What a good boy,” Lyndon said, pleased. “It’s fine. Do that and I’ll show you your room. Earl Phantomhive,” he bowed to Sebastian. “I’ll be waiting for your return but please do not rush. Finnie will be happy here.”

Sebastian didn’t even bother to reply, not taking his eyes off Ciel. Finally, he moved to the door, putting on his coat and still throwing glances at him. Was he anxious? Just surprised? Indifferent? Who could tell with Sebastian?

Ciel took great pleasure in slamming the door in his face before he turned to Lyndon, hoping he looked collected enough.

Now that Sebastian was gone, the room had gone colder. Lyndon was openly leering and Ciel tried to ignore it, looking at the middle of his forehead to avoid his eyes.

“My room?” he asked.

To his relief, Lyndon didn’t touch him as they made their way upstairs, but he was still walking
unbearably closely, making every hair on Ciel’s body stand up in agitation.

He just wanted to find himself behind the closed door. He would decide what to do and how to react then.

The room Lyndon brought him to was already prepared for someone. Ciel studied it critically, noting the made-up bed and candies on the side of the shelf, and then his gaze fell on the toy elephant waiting on a small table and he froze.

“Please, enjoy my hospitality,” Lyndon said with a grin. “I’ll go tell my cook to prepare dinner for one more person for today. I’ll call you when it’s ready and we’ll discuss your responsibilities, yes?”

Ciel nodded, unable to speak. Lyndon insulted him with one final look before he disappeared, closing the door, and Ciel exhaled, stumbling and nearly falling on the bed.

This day was proving to be much more terrible than he had expected. On the one hand, Sebastian did the right thing — hadn’t Ciel given him an order to say whatever he needed to solve this case? But making him into a bait like this…

Ciel could have let it pass, but he knew that the case had nothing to do with it.

Sebastian had done it deliberately, wanting to break him. Like he’d thought, Sebastian found his nightmares and his panic attacks irritating, a sign of weakness that deserved only contempt. So now he was locked in a house with a man who violated and murdered children, and unless he was ready to let Sebastian win, he had to hold on long enough for Lyndon to reveal himself.

Slowly, Ciel pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and held them there until he saw nothing but sparkles.

The mere thought of it sent a new wave of nausea up his throat, but he still hoped that Lyndon would attack today. If he was forced to spend an entire night in this house—

Misery and bitterness threatened to engulf him again and Ciel tried to swallow them down.

If he wanted victory, he had to stay strong. Sebastian was undoubtedly nearby, probably somewhere on the roof, waiting for his orders — or for him to change his mind and demand to be taken home.

Ciel wouldn’t allow him to win and he absolutely didn’t want to see him right now. Let him come when he would be in danger. Until then, the farther away Sebastian was from him, the better.

Ciel hid his face in the pillow, breathing like he had taught himself to, counting three and a half seconds before each breath.

*Sebastian hadn’t found the drug and he wanted to provoke Lyndon into direct assault. That was all.*

If he could believe this lie, maybe everything would be easier…

But he couldn’t allow himself such luxury, not again. At this point, he was too old to hide in illusions.
When Lyndon called him for dinner, it was already getting dark outside. Ciel went downstairs, forcing a small smile on his face.

“Sit down,” Lyndon waved at the sofa. “I’ll bring us some tea.”

The way he was acting, it didn’t seem like he even had a cook. Was that a lie, too?

Ciel took one look at the dinner and wrinkled his nose in disgust. No respectable cook would make such an appalling mass of whatever this was. Even Sebastian had done much better when he was only starting to—

The thought brought a surge of hurt with it and Ciel forcefully banished it from his mind.

Lyndon returned with only one cup of tea, setting it in front of Ciel and smiling his disgusting smile again.

“You wouldn’t mind if I sat next to you, would you?” he asked, taking a seat nearby without waiting for his answer. “You haven’t replied before, what happened to your eye?”

“An accident,” Ciel said quietly, staring at the tea. Was the drug already in it? If yes, then Lyndon must have retrieved it and Sebastian must have heard it. Why hadn’t he come yet? Or maybe Lyndon didn’t intend to use the drug on him at all?

“Drink your tea,” Lyndon pushed the cup closer to him, making the distance between them even shorter.

What a caring host. So, there was a drug in this beverage, or whatever it was. Where was Sebastian?

A new thought came to Ciel and all his fears about Lyndon faded in comparison to the wave of horror it evoked.

What if Sebastian had already grown tired of him? Maybe he didn’t want his soul any longer and wasn’t interested in their contract. Maybe his plan involved abandoning him with Lyndon and amusing himself by watching Ciel’s realisation, drinking in his terror and grief.

Black spots flared beneath his eyelids and Ciel barely kept himself from jumping to his feet and running away. It didn’t even matter where — he just knew he had to get out of here.

Everything in him tensed when Lyndon leaned even closer, raising his hand and moving to touch him, and while Ciel forced himself to keep still, he knew his control was in shreds. If this man touched him—

Lyndon suddenly disappeared. Ciel blinked, his mind too numb from fear to register what had happened, but when he looked to his right, he saw Lyndon lying next to the door, moaning and holding his bloodied forehead. Sebastian descended to the floor smoothly, and immediately, darkness crawled into the room, filling every corner with whispery shadows. Something clicked
when he landed, and when Ciel craned his neck, he noticed the heels that had replaced his usual boots. Black feathers coloured the room in even darker shades, creating an ethereal-looking carpet.

Sebastian had taken his true form? He must be really angry.

Only then the realization that everything was over came to him, and the relief it brought was staggering. Ciel’s muscles went slack and he curled in the corner of the sofa, watching Sebastian but unable to do anything. He felt like he had been injected with the drug, after all — he couldn’t explain why his body chose to stop working now that the danger was over.

Sebastian turned to him and for a moment, Ciel was hypnotized by the redness and unearthliness of his eyes. Upon approaching, Sebastian kneeled, taking his hand in his carefully.

“Your rings, Master,” he uttered, and his voice sounded strange. Eerier but softer.

Ciel waited until Sebastian put his rings back on his fingers before pushing out, “So what was it about my order that you’ve twisted?”

A fleeting smile touched Sebastian’s lips, baring his fangs.

“You ordered me to search his house,” he purred. “You didn’t order me to search him. He had the drug in his pocket the entire time.”

Oh. Well, Ciel had expected something exactly like this.

Bitter words rolled on his tongue, demanding to be let out, but he pressed his lips together tightly to avoid the temptation.

Nothing had to be said. He knew Sebastian couldn’t be trusted — it was his own fault for loosening his wariness.

“Why didn’t you stop me?” Sebastian was still holding his hand and Ciel thought about snatching it away. For the reason he couldn’t understand, though, he didn’t.

“Why would I back down from the challenge?” he snapped instead, suddenly furious. “Did you think I would be too scared to be left alone with him? I’ve lived through worse! I wasn’t sure about the drug and I was curious how long it would take for you to interfere. You endangered me.”

“I didn’t endanger you.”

Ciel scoffed in disbelief, but the burst of strength he had felt was already leaving, so he said nothing.

“I would have never let him touch you,” Sebastian said gravely. His eyes were still burning brightly, alight with admiration and fascination, and Ciel hated himself for how good this cheap display made him feel.

“What would you like me to do with him?”

This was a much safer topic. Ciel considered it carefully before replying, “Break every bone in his body. Don’t leave even one whole.”

Sebastian smiled again and then pressed his lips to Ciel’s hand.

“Yes, my lord,” he said.
Ciel watched how he turned and began to approach Lyndon, every step measured and deliberately slow. Lyndon, who was sitting up at this point, looking dazed, stared at him open-mouthed before letting out a scream.

“What are you?” he yelled. When Sebastian didn’t reply, his voice became more hysterical, “D-don’t come any closer! I’ll give you money, I’ll—”

“Even if you had money, I couldn’t be possibly interested in such utterly human things,” Sebastian said condescendingly. He was still walking, his heels clicking steadily, and Ciel pulled his knees to his chest, watching.

The room darkened further. A few more feathers fell and Ciel wondered where they disappeared to afterwards. The only feather he had ever seen remain was the one he had managed to grab during his first case, the one that was still tucked safely in his bedroom. Others vanished as soon as Sebastian regained his human form.

Sebastian’s heels clicked for the last time, and then there was a snap that made Lyndon scream. The sound was deafening but Ciel drank it in, smiling almost against his will. The second snap was louder, accompanied by shrieking so piercing, you would think Lyndon was being torn in two.

“No!” he wailed. “Please, please, no! Don’t! Whatever you are, you can have the boy, just leave me alone!”

“I can have the boy?” Sebastian repeated, chuckling derisively. “That boy is already mine.”

Not until you help me fulfil my revenge, Ciel thought, but he didn’t feel invested enough to say it aloud. There was another crunching noise and Lyndon screamed again, this time also sobbing openly.

Exhaustion started to press against Ciel’s eyelids. He blinked twice and then closed his eyes, listening to Lyndon’s incoherent begging and to the sound of the breaking bones. To his ears, there was no music better than this.

He woke up from the feeling of fingers brushing against his cheek. The touch was instinctively familiar, with its coolness and the promise of safety, and Ciel knew it was Sebastian even before waking fully.

“My lord,” Sebastian called, and Ciel reluctantly looked up.

Oh, right. Lyndon’s house.

He peeked at the body sleepily but it seemed to be drowning in darkness, so he failed to distinguish anything but its vague shape.

“I must have done a poor job if you’ve managed to fall asleep despite all that screaming,” Sebastian said, amused.

“It was passable,” Ciel replied curtly. He tried to get up but his body still felt too numb and weak to cooperate. Frowning, he tried again, but nothing happened.

“Why can’t I move normally?” he asked. “Did he give me the drug somehow, after all?”

“No. I believe it’s simply stress,” Sebastian took his face in his hands and tilted his head back,
studying his eyes and then touching his forehead. “You don’t display any other physical symptoms. Perhaps—”

He suddenly stopped talking. Then, before Ciel could understand what’s going on, he was grabbed, placed on his feet, and turned so he would be facing the door. It burst open a second later, with several police officers preceded by Randall storming inside. They all came to a halt upon seeing them.

“Phantomhive?” Randall asked slowly. “What are you doing here? And… what are you wearing?”

Sebastian stood behind him, with one of his hands pressed against the middle of his back to hold him up, hard and immovable like stone. After momentary confusion, Ciel leaned against it, knowing that to Randall, it must look like he was standing normally, without any help.

“Completing the case,” he said loftily, glad that at least his voice was working properly. “And my clothing is a reflection of that.”

“What case?”

Ciel furrowed his eyebrows.

“Are you implying that you’ve forgotten what case I, and you, have been investigating? With such memory, I’m not surprised you had failed to find the murderer until now.”

“What are you talking about?” Randall growled. “We were informed about someone being tortured here. The neighbours said that there was an incessant screaming lasting for more than an hour. Unlike you, I’m investigating several cases at once and this one is—”

Ciel snorted loudly, interrupting him.

“Then you can go find something else to focus on. This house belongs to Frederick Lyndon. He’s the one responsible for the series of child murders. And since he’s dead, there is nothing to investigate.”

“Dead!” Randall gaped at him and then, for the first time, his eyes fell on the floor. Ciel could tell the exact moment he realised what he was seeing as he took a step back in clear shock before coming to his senses. The other officers also approached, studying Lyndon and then backing away, some of them gasping.

Randall stared at Ciel like he had never seen him before.

“What did you do to him?” his voice was hoarse. “How in the Lord’s name can you explain it?”

A surge of weakness sent black spots dancing in front of his eyes. Ciel leaned against Sebastian’s hand even more to reduce the strain that his body was claiming it felt before concentrating on Randall again.

“Why would you think I’d be willing to explain anything to you?” he asked. His word were somewhat slurred but Ciel hoped it would pass for sounding deliberately lazy. “I’ve found the murderer. The task the Queen has assigned to me has been completed. Lyndon won’t have to waste the Her Majesty’s time further by having more costs spent on him. East End children are safe again.”

“You little mons—”
“Commissioner!” One of the officers stepped forward, touching Randall’s sleeve carefully. Then he whispered something into his ear, so quietly that Ciel hadn’t heard it, but judging from how Randall’s face flushed angrily, he didn’t like it.

“He cooperates with the underworld!” he barked. “This is how he solved this case.”

“‘Solved’ is the only word that matters here,” Ciel commented coldly. Despite Sebastian serving as the wall he could lean against, his legs were slowly giving out, and unless he wanted to become a laughing stock in front of these people, he had to end this conversation soon. “You know who I am. You know what my role is. What else did you expect?”

Randall said nothing, seething silently, and Ciel smirked.

“I’m not finished here yet,” he said. “Take your people outside and wait for me to come out. Then you can have his body if you need it. You’ll find the Indian drug in his pocket and you’ll find the toy similar to the one retrieved from the last body in one of the rooms.”

If looks could kill, he would undoubtedly be dead right now, considering the hatred and disgust Randall’s glare emanated.

“You can’t command me,” he spat. “Neither I nor my people have to obey you.”

“Well, you do obey the Queen, don’t you? And since this is my case and I was the one to find the murderer, I have to finish everything for my report to her. Leave, now. I won’t repeat myself.”

“Be assured that I’ll be talking to the Queen as well,” Randall promised grimly. Then he nodded at the other officers and they all left, some of them throwing wary glances at Lyndon’s body.

As soon as the door closed, Sebastian scooped him up and Ciel sighed in relief, leaning his head against his shoulder.

“Finally,” he murmured. “Take me home now. Use some other exit.”

“But you told Lord Randall that you would call for him once you’re finished.”

“Let him wait,” Ciel’s eyes closed by themselves. “He’ll enter the house again soon or later.”

On the brink of his fading conscious, he heard, “Yes, my lord,” and buried his face in Sebastian’s jacket deeper.

Finally, safety.

***

Nightmares plagued him throughout the night, but he woke up only in the morning, which meant that he hadn’t made any noise to attract Sebastian’s attention. He still felt weak and lightheaded, but at least his body started to cooperate again.
Ciel looked forward to leaving London. What he didn’t expect was to be mauled by all three of his new servants who jumped on him the moment he walked into the dining room.

“Young Master, it was so smart of you to solve the case!” Finnie exclaimed. Out of the three, he was the only clenching the side of Ciel’s coat gently, probably afraid to do more.

“It was so brave of you to confront the murderer by yourself!” Mey-Rin echoed, and Bard shook his shoulder enthusiastically.

“That’s what I call strategy!” he announced. “Sebastian told us all about it! Good job!”

Ciel was dumbfounded for a moment, torn between the desire to push them away and yell at them, forbidding them to ever touch him, and feeling strangely pleased at being praised. Not that he needed it, but it was nice, to hear that his success was appreciated.

His servants really weren’t that bad.

“It was nothing,” he said coolly, untangling himself from their grip. “I was doing my job, that’s all. Will I be served breakfast today?”

“Certainly, Master!”

“Right away!”

Ciel watched them run from the room, almost tripping in their still-palpable excitement, and shook his head, feeling strangely fond.

Then he caught Sebastian’s knowing look and scoffed. As if that demon understood anything about emotions.

Later, back at home, Ciel tried to focus on his correspondence, but his thoughts kept changing direction, dragging him back into the past.

The case was over. There was nothing to worry about. He could remove it from his memory and go on.

But no matter how many times he repeated it, he failed to get rid of the nauseating thoughts, of the crippling, infuriating fear that attacked him in short but intense bursts, making his hands grow clammy.

He felt in danger. Even now, sitting in his office, knowing that Sebastian would come as soon as he called, he felt threatened, to the point that he hadn’t experienced before, at least not after several months of his return.

Upset, Ciel left his office and went downstairs. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to do, wasn’t willing to acknowledge the longing to be in someone’s presence, but when he reached the living room, he stopped, with all his thoughts ending abruptly.

Mey-Rin, Finnie, and Bard were sitting at the table. Sebastian was standing in front of the fireplace, wearing his glasses, which meant that he was in a teacher mode.

“Wrong, Mey-Rin,” he said patiently. “Please check the notes again. Finnie? Your answer?”
“Uhm... ‘sh’, as in ‘shovel’?”

“Good example. The answer is still wrong, though,” Sebastian turned to Bard. “Bard?”

“I don’t have any answer yet,” Bard grinned sheepishly. Sebastian sighed, and Ciel, instantly recognising this sound as a sign of his growing annoyance, smiled.

Sebastian was a good teacher. Strict and demanding, but efficient and surprisingly patient. If anyone could teach Mey-Rin, Finnie, and Bard something, it was him.

Allowing himself one last look, Ciel backed away quietly, still smiling.

The smile left him when the distance between them grew and coldness replaced the warmth again, followed by familiar hollowness.
Thank you all so much for your wonderful support and encouragement! I appreciate it way more than I can express. Sorry for the delay - I've lost my beloved pet and it hit me hard. Still, writing is a perfect cure.

This chapter is much kinder to Ciel than the last one - I wanted to give him and Sebastian some (relatively) quieter moments, something that they had to share in-between the cases. However, a few problems still occur ;)

Even though it was half past midnight, Ciel couldn’t sleep. He watched the shadows in his room dispassionately, waiting for his consciousness to fade, but when the hand of the clock moved towards one and nothing happened, he’d had enough.

Quietly, hoping that everyone had already gone to bed, he slipped off the bed and crept to the door. The kitchen had to be empty at this time and there had to be some dessert left after supper. Unless, of course, his fools of servants had secretly eliminated it.

Knowing that Sebastian would send him back to bed if he caught him, Ciel quickened his pace, looking around suspiciously. Despite all the time they’d spent together, he still didn’t know the limits of Sebastian’s hearing, and while he could ask directly, he knew Sebastian would be deliberately vague and uncooperative. The bastard loved taking him aback and letting him make wrong conclusions about his capabilities.

The kitchen was lifeless. A quick inspection showed that yesterday’s cake was indeed missing, but there was a tray full of freshly-baked cookies. Sebastian must have prepared them in advance.

Ciel gleefully grabbed the cookie and prepared to dash back to his room when loud voices sounded just behind the door. Before he could even register it properly, he dived under the long, narrow table that stood in the farthest corner of the kitchen, crawling behind one of the barrels under it.

For a second, he was caught between the outrage at his own undignified behaviour and the reluctance to crawl back and be seen stealing a cookie. Which was worse? And why did anyone choose to come in here now, when he was just about to leave!

As he was trying to determine which solution would be more embarrassing, the door opened and several people walked inside.

“And I’m telling you, I was right! Sebastian just doesn’t want to admit that my answers can be good, too.”

“Well, to be absolutely honest, Bard, they weren’t that good,” Mey-Rin noted carefully, and even without seeing them, Ciel knew that Bard must be scowling.

“If you weren’t distracted by making eyes at him—”

“What? I did not!” Mey-Rin yelped. “I most certainly didn’t!”
“What is this racket?”

Ciel froze, probably along with Bard and Mey-Rin, as Sebastian joined them. His displeasure was palpable to a degree that made Ciel shudder, hating the mere thought of being caught by Sebastian out of everyone in this pitiful condition, with a cookie in his hand.

“Mey-Rin,” Sebastian’s voice was cold. “I believe I’ve asked you to clean the kitchen.”

“Y-yes, you did, it’s just… I decided to help Bard to—”

…On second thought, he could probably leave the cookie behind one of the barrels and dispose of it in the morning.

Ciel glanced at the floor, then back at the cookie. The feeling of regret was rapidly drowning his common sense, so in the end, he picked another option.

Whether Sebastian already knew he was here or not, Ciel refused to be viewed as a child who couldn’t resist a dessert. Leaving it could still compromise him, so why not eat it while Sebastian was busy scolding his oblivious servants?

Satisfied with himself, Ciel bit into the creamy surface, hoping that any sounds he might make would be muted by the argument ensuing. Mey-Rin was apparently striving to place the tray with cookies in the refrigerator while Bard kept insisting that doing anything in the kitchen was his job. Honestly, they couldn’t even share their responsibilities without creating mayhem.

Mey-Rin won. Her feet moved towards the table with the cookies and Ciel cringed, suddenly glad that he’d managed to preserve at least one.

As he’d thought, this airhead failed to get to the refrigerator: she slipped on something and the tray went flying. Since none of the cookies landed on the floor, Ciel assumed that Sebastian managed to catch them on time, but to do that, he must have dropped whatever it was he’d been holding. There was a crash and Ciel forgot to take another bite, staring at the broken pieces of his favourite teacups.

Had this demon just dropped a tray with teacups to catch a tray with cookies?

Glowering, Ciel clenched his free hand into a fist, wishing he could tell Sebastian just what he thought about his priorities. However, it seemed that Sebastian was annoyed with himself as it was. There was a long, dark silence, and his voice was a menacing growl when he finally snapped, “Get out of my sight.”

Another pause. Then Mey-Rin cried, quietly but so despondently that Ciel’s heart twitched unwillingly in sympathy. He lowered his head to get a better look, wondering if he should have a conversation with Sebastian later. He wanted loyalty, not fear, and having his servants constantly reduced to tears wouldn’t do.

On the other hand, they truly were hopeless and risked embarrassing him at any event he might have to host in the future. How could he trust them to appear in front of the guests?

Nonetheless, an involuntarily relief surged through Ciel when Bard stepped to Mey-Rin and wrapped his hand around her shoulders. His other hand stroked her hair lightly before sliding down her neck and squeezing it.

“Never mind,” he said cheerfully, throwing a wary glance at Sebastian. “We’re still learning, aren’t we?”
Mey-Rin sniffed but stopped crying, giving Bard a weak smile.

“Learning how to fail every single task assigned to you,” Sebastian uttered lowly. He kept staring at them with such strange intensity that Ciel blinked, confused, unsure of what to make of it. Then he backed away, hiding from view again and pressing closer to the wall.

“You’re the one who dropped the cups!” Bard protested and Ciel almost groaned. It was the worst thing Bard could possibly say right now.

This time, the silence was so tense that Ciel started to seriously wonder if he should interfere before Sebastian killed both of his servants and they were forced to look for someone else. However, Sebastian’s voice was surprisingly pleasant when he said, “You have precisely four seconds to leave the kitchen. One. Two. Three—”

Based on the sounds, Bard and Mey-Rin broke into a run to reach the door before Sebastian finished counting. Ciel stopped breathing for a moment, hoping that Sebastian would clean up and leave, and his eyes widened when instead, he turned and began to slowly approach his table.

Mortified, Ciel squeezed the half-eaten cookie, but before he could throw it behind one of the barrels, Sebastian drawled, “My, my, Young Master. We have taken to spying now?”

Damn him.

Ciel took a deep breath, put on his calmest mask and crawled out from under the table.

“We haven’t,” he said coolly. “I merely wanted to avoid having a conversation with those morons.”

“And what were you doing in the kitchen in the first place? Oh, let me guess,” Sebastian stepped closer and snatched the cookie from his hand, smiling mockingly. “My little lord can’t fall asleep without consuming more sugar.”

“If so, then you didn’t put enough sugar in the evening’s dessert,” Ciel retorted automatically. He knew there was nothing he could say to actually defend himself, but he still wasn’t going to let Sebastian have the last word.

Sebastian sighed, then bent down and grabbed him by the chin firmly, pulling him close.

“We will count this éclair as your morning portion of dessert, Young Master,” he purred, and Ciel flushed, embarrassed for a reason he didn’t understand. Shaking himself free, he stepped away, putting more distance between them, glaring.

“Don’t tell me what to eat!” he announced. Sebastian simply stared at him and finally, Ciel was forced to relent. “Fine,” he grumbled. He couldn’t really argue with Sebastian when he was right, not when Ciel himself had ordered him to put his well-being above everything else.

He stormed towards the door but then paused.

“You’ve dropped the tray with teacups,” he uttered, and Sebastian’s left eye twitched. Ciel lifted his head higher, gleefully thrilled.

“You decided to catch the cookies but you’ve destroyed my favourite tea set,” he added. “You couldn’t catch all of those things at once?”

“I apologise for my clumsiness, Master,” Sebastian said, sounding subdued, as if he had to force the words out. “I assure you this mistake won’t be repeated.”

“As you wish,” Sebastian bowed and Ciel finally left, smirking.

Despite this embarrassing situation, he still managed to emerge as a victor.

He might not get his dessert tomorrow morning but let Sebastian look for Haviland tea set, which was a rarity in London, in colours that didn’t exist.

That would be entertaining.

***

To Ciel’s deepest regret, he couldn’t send Sebastian on a chase after the non-existent tea set in the morning. The day started with a visitor that Ciel had never expected to see in his house, with the plea for help he’d never thought he’d get.

“I’m not pleading for your help,” Sir Arthur Randall growled, his face twisted in an ugly scowl. “Her Majesty wishes for this situation to be dealt with and she recommended that I involve you in the investigation. That’s all.”

“Is it?” Ciel tilted his head, letting his lips curl upwards. The swell of arrogant satisfaction in his chest that Randall’s visit had brought compensated for his stolen chance to complicate Sebastian’s life. “From what I understand, you are asking me to handle all the matters myself, without your direct participation.”

“You have connections with the underworld. Your influence there surpasses my own.”

“I wasn’t aware you had any,” Ciel smirked, watching how Randall’s face grew redder. “Let me clarify. There is an issue with the increasing number of drugs transported by the sea and discharged in the local ports. Since neither you nor your people have any means to affect the dealings of the underworld, you’ve faced a dead-end and came to me for help. You want me to eliminate those who participate in drugs exchange and intimidate the ports so no one would allow an unsanctioned ship to enter again.”

“I did not say ‘eliminate’. Is murder the only thing you understand?”

“Well, if you could arrest them, you would have already done that. Am I wrong?” Ciel lifted his eyebrow, and as Randall spluttered, he exchanged a brief, amused smile with Sebastian.

Randall was too proud and law-abiding to admit the truth aloud. If so, Ciel mused, he would have to be pushed a little further.

“I will solve this problem,” he said, sending Randall his most innocent smile. “I’ll start with the docks in the Port of London. However, I’ll require payment for my services.”

With the corner of his eye, Ciel noticed how Sebastian’s smile widened, and familiar warmth
bloomed in his chest, increasing his confidence.

“Payment?!” Randall jumped to his feet so abruptly that he hit the table. His teacup shook dangerously and Ciel couldn’t help but notice how Sebastian jerked as if to catch it. His mirth grew, brushing against his ribs, and he had to hide his smirk by pressing his fist to his lips and pretending to cough.

Sebastian was clearly worried that another tea set was going to be ruined.

He was right to worry. Ciel would gladly send him for several more sets, coming up with new non-existent colour combinations.

“Yes, payment,” he replied as he regained control over his voice, though his every word still rang with amusement. “I won’t help you for free.”

“This is for Her Majesty, you insolent brat!”

“Watch your tone,” Ciel warned. His good mood evaporated suddenly, replaced by the biting coldness.

He hated being disrespected. He hated being reduced to a child every time someone disagreed with him.

“I was under impression,” he said coldly, “that you came here to ask for my help. You know you can’t do what Her Majesty requires but you still want to receive Her recognition by completing the task with my hands. I’m willing to assist. However, insulting me is not the best way to get a favourable answer.”

Randall clenched his hands into fists, probably in attempt to fight the impulse to strangle him.


This man was truly an idiot.

“I have no need for your money,” Ciel said in disgust. “Do you honestly think you could offer anything of substance to me financially? You’re forgetting yourself.”

Randall growled something barely decipherable under his breath and Sebastian frowned.

“Please avoid using such language in the presence of my Master,” he said, and although his words sounded friendly, Ciel easily sensed a coiling displeasure under their surface. “And I can assure you, this won’t happen.”

Interesting. Had Randall threatened him?

Considering how shocked and then mortified he looked upon realising that Sebastian had heard him, yes.

“I apologise,” he said so slowly, as if every syllable pained him. “What would you like in return for your assistance?”

Whatever he’d said, it had to be terribly bad.

“I’ll need two things,” Ciel uttered. “The first one is the immunity for one of my people. I want Scotland Yard to ignore everything he engages in — and by that, I mean everything.”
“You can’t ask for something like that!” Randall spat. “Scotland Yard is forced to tolerate your underworld dealings as it is. Do you want the criminals to lose the last bits of respect towards the law?”

“Scotland Yard is creating unnecessary raids that send only a handful of pawns in prison,” Ciel countered. “I’m maintaining a sufficient control over my districts. My underworld representative knows what he can and can’t do because I’m the one who sets limits for him. I don’t want him disturbed even occasionally because it creates numerous problems that you wouldn’t be able to start to comprehend.”

Randall looked like he was about to have a heart attack from his impotent fury. Fighting another smile, Ciel nodded at Sebastian and he stepped to Randall, bowing a little.

“Would you like another cup of tea, Lord Randall?” he asked. “Perhaps a late breakfast?”

“Who do you want this immunity for?” Randall demanded, and Ciel leaned against his chair more comfortably.

“I believe my butler has asked you a question,” he noted lazily.

If looks could kill, he would definitely drop dead under the force of Randall’s glare. Randall was almost trembling with rage as he turned to Sebastian and spat, “I’ve already eaten. I don’t need anything.”

Sebastian bowed again before retreating to his former place. His eyes were lit up with dark satisfaction that Ciel knew his own gaze mirrored.

“Lau,” he said, glancing back at Randall. “The Head of the British branch of the Chinese trade company. It’s known as "Kunlun".”

“I know who he is,” Randall grimaced in distaste. “An outsider.”

“Do you agree to this requirement?”

“Yes, damn you. What’s the second one?”

“I’ll be needing some information. In particular, some files that only Scotland Yard has access to. I’ll contact you later with more details.”

Randall muttered something again, so lowly and furiously that Ciel failed to understand it.

“That won’t happen either,” Sebastian said, sounding bored, and Randall jerked his head up in astonishment.

“How—” he started but Ciel interrupted him.

“Yes or no?”

“Yes,” Randall sent him another vicious glare. “Let me know when you complete the task.”

“I will,” Ciel promised, allowing himself a condescending smile.

From the window, he watched how Randall’s carriage departed. When it disappeared from view, Ciel sighed and dropped back onto his chair.
“We’ll have to go to London,” he said. “While I’ll let Lau arrange everything, I still want to stay close in case we’ll need to interfere.”

“You don’t sound happy about it,” Sebastian remarked and Ciel gave him a sour gaze.

“Of course I don’t. We’re likely to spend an entire week in the house with nothing to do.” Ciel glared at his now-empty cup of tea. “These types of cases are the most boring but technically, they are my main responsibility.”

“Understood,” Sebastian’s eyes lingered on him, piercing and attentive, and a twinge of suspicion stirred inside Ciel.

That gaze never led to anything good.

However, Sebastian sounded as nonchalant as ever when he asked, “Will we be going today?”

“Yes,” Ciel replied slowly. Sebastian lips twisted in a brief, mischievous smile, and suspicions grew, hissing in warning angrily. Still, no matter how hard he tried, Ciel couldn’t figure out what this warning might be. What could Sebastian be possibly plotting here? There were no orders that he could twist to his advantage. Maybe he simply wanted to go to London, away from the servants?

Ciel could understand this desire.

“So, what are you waiting for?” he asked. “Prepare everything.”

Sebastian bowed, but his little smile didn’t disappear.

“Yes, my lord,” he uttered.

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When they arrived, the sky had only begun to gather dark clouds, turning into one huge splash of grey. By the time Ciel finished arranging everything with Lau and locked himself in his London house office, the thunder was already making the walls shake, filling his ears with hateful noise and distracting him from work.

He disliked rain, especially when he was alone in the house. The only source of comfort was that he’d sent Sebastian to London shops in search of the Haviland tea set — imagining him in this storm, going from one shop to another, was funny enough to lighten Ciel’s darkening mood.

He stared at the pile of Funtom correspondence again, depressed at the very thought of having to compose answers to each letter today. Why did everyone want to speak to him in particular? And why were so many employees willing to deceive him? How long would it take for everyone to understand that his age didn’t mean he was brainless?

Annoyed, Ciel took another letter… and then stopped.

A strange, eerily familiar acrid smell started to fill the room. Bitter, toxic, revolting — the smell of death itself.
Ciel jumped up, wide-eyed, unable to believe what he was seeing. A plume of smoke billowed from beneath the door, spreading and crawling to him in misty clouds. His lungs constricted even before it reached him, reacting to the memory of it rather than to its actual impact, and the effect was so intense that it made him choke. Nausea boiled and Ciel doubled over, holding his mouth, terrified and incredulous.

Why the fire? How could it happen again, here?

“Sebastian!” he hissed, backing away, closer to the window. “Sebastian, come!”

Nothing happened, only the coils of smoke spread further, licking his boots greedily. There was no fire yet but the smoke was so thick that it destroyed his ability to see, trapping him in a suffocating mist where only the frantic thumping of his heart could be heard.

Ciel clung to the part of his mind that stubbornly fought the panic, persuading him that Sebastian would come before the smoke engulfed him completely, before the fire came, but fear grew at a terrifying speed, thrusting the images of his father sitting in his armchair, unmoving, surrounded by the flames. Ciel could almost feel their burning touch, sense their liquid hotness threatening to spill right over him, and with the last efforts, he took a deep shuddering breath, trying to stay calm.

Seeing nothing but smoke was only scaring him more so he closed his eyes, pressing his back against the wall, and waited.

No matter what his mind was telling him, this was not the past. This was the present. And in the present, he had a demon on his side who would drag him even from the hell itself — a demon who was obligated to protect him until their contract was fulfilled.

Ciel focused on this thought so intensely that when someone touched his shoulder, he flinched violently, stopping himself from crying out only at the last moment, recognising who this touch belonged to. His eyes flew open and he saw Sebastian’s confused face.

“Young Master?” he asked. “What’s wrong? You called for me.”

“What do you mean, what’s wro—” Ciel fell silent, staring at the room. At the smoke-free room.

Everything looked normal. There was no smoke, no acrid smell — only the thunder outside kept roaring, accompanying the constant thudding of the rain.

Slowly, Ciel stood up, feeling at a loss.

Had he lost himself in another vision from the past? But it had never happened like this before. He’d never seen such vivid images when he wasn’t asleep, and he had certainly never imagined the fire, or the smoke, for that matter. So what was it?

Still shaken, Ciel glanced at Sebastian and managed to catch a fleeting satisfied smirk on his face. It was gone in an instant, though, so he couldn’t be sure that he hadn’t imagined it.

And even if it was real, why would Sebastian set the room on fire? He could be malicious — he was malicious, but doing something like that for no purpose?

Ciel rubbed his forehead tiredly, hoping to soothe the painful pulsing in it. His thoughts were scattered, still intoxicated by the smoke that had apparently never been here to begin with, so he stumbled towards his table, looking at the letters blankly.

“Young Master?” Sebastian repeated patiently. “Will you tell me what’s wrong?”
“No,” Ciel shook his head. “It’s fine. Did you find the tea set?”

“I’m afraid not. I had checked three shops before you summoned me — if you’d like, I can resume searching right away.”

“No,” Ciel said again. Another crashing wave of thunder split the sky and he winced. The sound echoed in his head, intensifying the already burning headache. “Stay in the house,” he added. After what happened, he didn’t want to be alone, even if it meant that his tea set would have to wait.

“As you wish. Would you like me to make you some tea?”

“Yes.” Ciel watched how Sebastian left the room and something about him struck him as odd. Only when he disappeared behind the door, Ciel realised what it was.

Sebastian was dry. If he had been checking different shops and then rushed back to the house, he was bound to get at least something wet — his hair, his clothes… anything.

Suspicions shifted in his chest again, unpleasant and stifling, and Ciel leaned against his chair, staring at the ceiling.

It was pointless to try and guess. If Sebastian had decided to play some game, his intentions would become clear sooner or later. Ciel just had to wait — and make him pay dearly once he figured everything out.

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He supposed he should have guessed that after that strange occurrence with the smoke, a nightmare would inevitably follow. This time, Ciel dreamed of the flames, so blindingly orange that it hurt to even look at them. They were everywhere, blocking every exit, and whenever he turned, he saw his parents’ bodies.

It was strange because he was sure that he’d seen them dead together, on the floor of their bedroom, his Father holding his Mother in a protective embrace even now. Yet when Ciel ran to find help, when he stormed into the living room, he saw his father again, this time sitting in an armchair. As if someone or something had carried him there, right in the middle of the fire, separating him from his wife.

Which of these visions was the truth? What happened that day?

This nightmare was far from being the worst but Ciel still woke up gasping, his heart desperately trying to claw out of his chest. Tiredness and helpless fury at being so weak that every tiny incident could trigger him were maddening, and Ciel hit his bedside table with all his strength, fighting the urge to scream.

Why did it have to happen to him time and time again? Why couldn’t he sleep peacefully? Five days ago, the nightmares that had been haunting him after Lyndon finally stopped, and he treasured each night that he was able to spend without waking. Now, apparently, he was back to where he started, so more sleepless nights for him, more dreams that didn’t even make sense.
Ciel pressed his hands into his eyes, trying to calm his breathing, but it didn’t help. His heart kept accelerating, his brain kept persuading him that he couldn’t breathe, and panic, irrational and vague, was rapidly absorbing him, pushing him to run, run, run.

This impulse was so strong that Ciel concentrated on corralling it entirely, forgetting what and where he was. The next thing he knew, someone’s hand slid up his shoulders. Another hand touched his hair in a surprisingly gentle gesture before moving down his neck, giving it a light squeeze.

Ciel relaxed before he even understood what was happening. The touch was instantly familiar, soothing in its protectiveness, and he leaned into it readily, feeling how the fog in his mind began to clear. Then the strangeness of the situation sobered him up completely and he blinked, staring at Sebastian in surprise.

What had gotten into him? Sebastian was never so tactile. In fact, after his hesitant and failed attempt during Lyndon’s case, he had ignored Ciel’s nightmares altogether, not even coming to his room unless Ciel called for him. So why now? Why such drastic change?

Ciel wanted to ask but a cowardly part of him didn’t want to spoil the moment. Sebastian was still touching the back of his neck, watching him attentively, and Ciel stayed silent, grateful that his heart was calming down.

Sebastian repeated his set of movements, caressing his back, then his hair, then his neck again, still staring at him as if Ciel was an object of some fascinating study, and Ciel’s jaw nearly dropped when he finally realised what was happening.

Sebastian was mirroring humans again, this time choosing Bard as his behaviour model. Ciel remembered him studying how Bard comforted Mey-Rin in the kitchen, and now he was doing the same, observing the results of his movements curiously.

Another thought came, darker but equally perplexing.

Had Sebastian deliberately created some sort of fire illusion to encourage another nightmare? He must have wanted to try his new method of giving comfort and didn’t want to wait. But why would this crazy plot even occur to him?

Sebastian’s lips curled in a small, pleased smile as he noticed how Ciel calmed down, and he repeated his movements like the fool he was, probably thinking that the comforting shoulders-hair-neck pattern was a magic secret of humans.

Ciel knew he should be angry for such stunt, for such unbelievable, outrageous disobedience, but hysterical laughter was tearing from his chest and he could no longer hold it. He giggled, knowing he must look utterly stupid, but even this thought didn’t help. Sebastian’s eyebrows climbed up his forehead as he stared at him in astonishment, as if Ciel giggling, especially in such circumstances, was the most unexpected thing.

His astonishment was too much to bear. This time, Ciel burst into a genuine laughter, falling on his bed and trying to cover his mouth to mute the sounds. Sebastian’s surprise turned into palpable disbelief, and then his face took on such an affronted look that Ciel laughed again, loudly and uncontrollably.

This was unbelievable. Sebastian must have finally decided that a good butler should be able to comfort his Master in the moments of distress and started looking for clues. After catching Bard comforting Mey-Rin, the stupid demon thought that repeating the same movements mechanically
over and over again was a secret to calming Ciel down, and that the more times he repeated this pattern, the better results he would get.

“I’m glad you’re feeling well again, Master,” Sebastian said icily. Ciel tried to reply but failed, remembering the smugness on Sebastian’s face as he touched his shoulders, hair, and neck repeatedly, like they were some secret magic spells he’d discovered.

Sebastian stiffened even more, narrowing his eyes dangerously at Ciel’s continued laughter.

“Is something wrong with you again?” he asked, his voice still cold. “Should I bring you anything?”

“No,” Ciel managed to choke out. “Just leave. I’m going to sleep now.”

Sebastian studied him for a moment before nodding sharply and disappearing from the room, almost slamming the door shut.

Ciel was still grinning from the absurdity of it all when he fell asleep again.

***

In the morning, both he and Sebastian pretended that nothing happened. Sebastian was fulfilling his duties as impeccably as always and Ciel watched him occasionally, wondering how someone so hopeless at some things could be so perfect in others.

Since they had no plans for the next several days, Sebastian insisted on doubling the amount of his lessons. Ciel didn’t mind, exactly, but he couldn’t help but feel wary. Sebastian was undeniably insulted at his reaction to his efforts last night, and he was petty enough to take it out on him during their lessons, the only time when Ciel couldn’t rebuke him.

Determined to not give Sebastian a chance to punish him today, Ciel focused on his tasks vigorously, extracting every little bit of knowledge from his mind and pouring them into his answers. Sebastian, contrary to his expectations, seemed delighted with his progress. As he was checking Ciel’s calculations, Ciel watched him with the corner of his eye, noting another interesting fact. Sebastian’s pointer, which he used for hitting him for every mistake, was missing today.

Come to think of it, it was missing during other lessons, too, for quite a while now. Had he stopped making mistakes, so Sebastian stopped bringing it?

Maybe his progress was even better than Ciel’d thought initially.

“Absolutely correct,” Sebastian concluded, drawing something on the paper with exercises and giving it back to Ciel. “I suggest a short break, Master. I’m going to make you tea and then we can proceed to a violin lesson.”

“Violin,” Ciel grimaced, his mood souring. He disliked playing as much as Sebastian seemed to be enamoured with music. Ciel sincerely doubted he would ever need this useless skill in his line of work, so Sebastian’s fixation on it was annoying at best.
“Every nobleman must know how to play musical instruments,” Sebastian uttered, taking off his glasses and checking the time. “You will marry Lady Elisabeth one day. She will appreciate your skills.”

“What?!” Ciel exclaimed, a burning sensation hitting his cheeks. “That’s ridiculous! If it’s the only reason why you’re making me have these lessons—”

“Does Young Master not intend to marry?” Sebastian inquired innocently and Ciel glowered at him.

“Don’t even talk of such things! And unless you’re planning to stretch my revenge for decades, I’m never going to be old enough to marry.”

Amusement faded from Sebastian’s face, replaced by what looked like genuine surprise.

“I believe young men can marry as soon as they turn fourteen these days,” he noted. “You don’t expect to live even to that age?”

Ciel stood up, mortified that such conversation was happening at all. And with whom? A demon!

“Women of noble birth tend to marry later,” he hissed. “And if you do your job properly, marriage will never be one of my problems. Now cease this pointless discussion! Bring me my tea.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian bowed, but he still looked strange, as if he hadn’t expected to receive such answer. When he finally left, Ciel huffed, moving to the window and crossing his arms.

He had never considered the specific timeframe of his revenge, he just knew he wanted it to happen sooner rather than later. Living to fourteen? Maybe. Maybe even to fifteen. But his search couldn’t take longer than that. The more time passed, the more difficult finding the culprits was going to get. And helping Ciel complete his revenge quickly was in Sebastian’s own interests — unless, of course, he truly enjoyed being a butler… which was just laughable.

Marriage.

Ciel shivered with disgust at the very notion and went back to his chair.

He’d never thought there would be things for which he’d feel glad to be too young.

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Learning a new composition was as boring as Ciel knew it would be. He tolerated Sebastian’s instructions, his fleeting yet constant touches aiming to improve his posture, and the sounds the violin made, which, frankly, he found quite unimpressive. When an hour had passed and Sebastian still urged him to go on, Ciel told himself that he would play one last time. One last time and he would discard the violin, regardless of Sebastian’s wishes.

The composition was coming to an end and Ciel prepared to declare that he’d had enough when his gaze fell on Sebastian’s face.
Sebastian’s eyes were closed, his lips arched in a pleased, relaxed smile. He looked so peaceful that Ciel was taken aback for a second, unable to believe that his playing could captivate a being like him.

The melody ended but Ciel restarted it immediately, watching how Sebastian’s smile widened in response and how he tilted his head, obviously enjoying himself.

Warm pleasure flooded his chest and Ciel concentrated on playing, suddenly much more more mindful of his abilities. His unexplainable enthusiasm broke through his boredom and this time, he tried to put all his efforts into what he was playing, glancing at Sebastian occasionally to make sure that he was still enjoying it.

The belated annoyance at his own reaction came at him only on the final part of the composition. As soon as Ciel finished it, he put the violin and the bow down, unable to believe that he’d modified his plans just to please the demon. What’s gotten into him? Who cared whether Sebastian was enjoying himself? If he liked violin music so damn much, he could play it himself.

However, despite his resentment, he couldn’t help but recall the blissful, carefree look on Sebastian’s face, and feel pleased at being the one who evoked it.

And it made his resentment grow.

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The storm didn’t seem to be waning. On the contrary, it grew stronger in the next two days, to the point where even correspondence stopped being delivered, and Ciel was slowly losing his mind out of boredom.

Now that he’d finished composing all his replies, there was nothing to do with his time. He had lessons, read books, and played chess, sometimes against himself and sometimes against Sebastian. That was it.

He needed work.

When another evening came, Ciel had an idea.

“You wish to do what?” Sebastian asked dubiously.

“I’m going to devise a tabletop game,” Ciel said again, his brows furrowing at the need to repeat himself. “I’m not sure I’ll make it a part of Funtom production later, so as of now, the primary audience is myself.”

“Indeed?” Sebastian drawled sarcastically. “Have you finally become interested in toys, Young Master?”

“Don’t be absurd. I just want to try something new.”

“If I may ask, how do you plan to start?”
It was Ciel’s turn to smirk.

Later, he and Sebastian were sitting on the thick rug in front of the fireplace, surrounded by numerous construction elements, each busy with his own task. Ciel was working on the thick, hard cardboard sheet Sebastian had delivered, dividing it into parts and planning what each part would entail. Sebastian was cutting an endless supply of newspapers into tiny parts, still emanating displeasure at being forbidden to use his demonic powers.

Ciel wasn’t sure that all paper bits had to be of the same size, but it was funny to order Sebastian to make them 0.7 inches long and 0.4 inches wide precisely. Sebastian had refused to use anything for measurement, claiming that his eyes were far more accurate than any device, and Ciel promised himself that he would measure each and every one of the paper bits later to test this statement.

“Young Master, would that be enough?” Sebastian nodded at the huge pile of paper pieces.

“It will suffice for now,” Ciel acknowledged before focusing on the cardboard again. “You may leave now.”

He was so consumed by his work that when Sebastian suddenly appeared right next to him, peering at the cardboard, Ciel almost jumped.

“What are you doing?” Sebastian asked. Ciel narrowed his eyes suspiciously, dubious that Sebastian could be interested in some game, but his curiosity appeared sincere.

“This will be a board,” he replied finally. “We’ll make game pieces out of those bits of newspapers you’ve cut. Then there will be dices or something similar that will determine how many steps forward a player will make. There will also be obstacles on his way that will affect his progress.”

“So you’re thinking of what these obstacles will be?” Sebastian leaned over the would-be board, checking what Ciel had already marked. “‘Charmed by the dead’. What does it mean in terms of the game?”

“That the player who happens to enter this area is out for one turn. This one,” Ciel pointed at another piece of the board, “will send the player ten steps back.”

Sebastian let out a thoughtful sound, still staring at the board. Then he said, “Interesting,” and Ciel’s eye widened.

He’d intended to make Sebastian work on the game out of pettiness. He never imagined that Sebastian could become actually interested in it. After all, Ciel wouldn’t have been interested in it either, he just had nothing better to do.

“May I make several suggestions?” Sebastian wondered and Ciel shrugged.

“You may,” he said. “In fact, you may have this side of the board. But keep in mind that we’ll have to make drawings for each idea — the board cannot be blank.”

Sebastian nodded and took a pencil, clearly concocting some obstacles already, and Ciel wondered what kind of things a demon could come up with.

This whole game development was turning out to be far more engaging than he’d first thought it would be.
Time flew by so quickly that Ciel didn’t even notice how the clock struck midnight. Sebastian raised his head, looking briefly perplexed, before letting out a dejected sigh.

“It’s past your bedtime, Master,” he said. “I’m afraid I’ve been negligent in my duties.”

“Let me see what you’ve done first,” Ciel shifted closer to Sebastian’s side, studying his part of the board curiously.

Apart from writing, Sebastian had also drawn some drafts of the future pictures. Ciel hummed, unsure of what to think of some of them. A piece titled ‘Popular Fallacies’ depicted a dead woman with dissected brain. Then there was ‘A Quiet Sunday in London’, showing London rebels fighting against the police. Was it another subtle attempt of Sebastian to undermine the Queen’s system of governance?

Sebastian’s work was more intricate than Ciel had thought. He’d have to spend a while in attempt to figure out the meaning of some of his additions, both textual and subtextual ones. For some reason, Ciel didn’t doubt that each of them was far more malicious than the openly gruesome things he himself had come up with.

Sebastian, though, seemed suitably intrigued by them.

“Lost a Limb’?” he wondered.

“I want to draw a forest of death here,” Ciel said, glancing at the words he’d written. “If the player stops at this area, he will lose his legs. All his subsequent scores will be divided into two because —”

“…he’ll be able to cross only half the distance,” Sebastian finished for him, smiling a sharp, fangs-filled smile. “How positively bloodthirsty of you, Master.”

“That’s a special game,” Ciel noted, unable to hold back a satisfied smirk.

“A Den of Poison’? Correct me if I’m wrong, but doesn’t it resemble—”

“Of course it does. I can’t breathe long after we leave Lau’s little basement, so I thought at least one part of the game should reflect it.”

“And what will happen to the player?”

“When his next turn comes, he’ll be moving backwards. Poisoned smoke does soften one’s brain.”

“I see,” Sebastian’s eyes lit up and Ciel lowered his head to hide his smile. Of all things Sebastian could be interested in, it was their self-made tabletop game? Ciel didn’t really want to know, but sometimes he wondered what kind of life Sebastian had to lead to be so captivated by the most trivial things.

Still deeply amused, he glanced back at Sebastian’s side of the board and raised his eyebrows at the sight of one of the sketches.

Fire. He should have expected this. Sebastian loved playing games.

“Burning at the Stake’,” Ciel read, trying to sound calm. “It looks different from your other sketches. What’s the idea here?”
“Fire is something that even demons are wary of,” Sebastian replied. “Not all kinds of fire, but some of them might be dangerous even to our kind.”

“Fire means death. If the player steps here, he will automatically lose?”

“Not exactly,” Sebastian’s grin acquired even sharper angles. “I thought it would be fitting if the player had to miss his turn every second time until the end of the game.”

“Every second time?” Ciel frowned, considering it. “That’s harsh.”

“Games often are,” Sebastian touched the picture of the fire almost lovingly. “Especially games played by you, Young Master.”

Well, he was right.

“All right,” Ciel decided. “Then it’s set for now. We’ll start making actual drawings—”

“Tomorrow,” Sebastian interrupted him. “Right now, you have to go to sleep.”

“I know that,” Ciel snapped. “Stop finishing my sentences.”

He was reluctant to retire as he was going upstairs. As soon as he touched the bed, though, sleepiness engulfed him, slowing his senses to the point where he struggled to keep his eyes open.

Sebastian was fussing over him, tucking him in and adjusting his blanket, and Ciel grabbed him by his jacket, pulling him closer.

“Sebastian,” he murmured.

“Yes, my lord?”

“Those pieces of paper you’ve cut. I bet you’ve made at least one mistake in measurements.”

“Why would you think that?”

“I don’t think that. I know. Check them yourself, right now. It’s an order.”

“As you wish,” Sebastian smiled in a way Ciel couldn’t understand, crossing the distance between them and leaning even closer. Ciel thought he saw a red flash in his eyes but he was too drowsy to think about it further. His hold weakened and a second later, he succumbed to sleep.

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Sebastian was acting strange in the morning. He served Ciel breakfast and tea, was as attentive as always, but at the same time, he looked so sour that Ciel was at a loss.

Had something happened?
On the other hand, why would he care? He had no idea what Sebastian was up to at nights. As long as it wasn’t related to him directly, he was free to do what he wanted.

“Where are those bits of newspapers?” Ciel asked. “We have to put them into heated water and then put the pot someplace warm for a day.”

“I’ve already done that,” Sebastian said calmly, arranging the white roses on the table. “You’ve ordered me to take care of them last night.”

“I did?” Ciel frowned. “I don’t remember.”

Sebastian’s smile was tranquil when he turned to look at him.

“You were sleepy,” he uttered. “Your order was ambiguous but I assumed this was what you meant.”

“Well, next time, ask to make sure,” Ciel grumbled. Sebastian had ruined his chance to measure his work and find a mistake. Then again, maybe it was for the better — he could focus on the game itself now.

After picking up the supplies, they took their place near the fireplace again, both staring at the now-filled board.

“You paint your part, I’ll paint mine,” Ciel decided. “I’ll also paint the start of the game. You deal with the end.”

A cunning shadow flashed across Sebastian’s face.

“I will,” he agreed, and the fact that he was already plotting some vile scheme was so obvious that Ciel barely refrained from rolling his eye.

Let Sebastian do his worst. As if Ciel cared what kind of ending he made up.

They spent hours drawing, remaining silent when they were satisfied with each other’s results and sneering openly when something was wrong. Ciel shuddered as Sebastian added colours to his painting of the flames, setting the drawn woman on fire and giving her face a terrified look. Even though he tried to follow Ciel’s style of drawing, his pictures were still infinitely better, and while annoying, it was to be expected.

“How will you call this game?” Sebastian wondered, adding darker shades to another picture.

“I don’t know,” Ciel picked up a green pencil, trying to make his forest look as vivid as Sebastian’s flames were. “I won’t be submitting it to Funtom factories, so it doesn’t require a name.”

“You are not going to name it?” Heavy dissatisfaction in Sebastian’s voice made Ciel look up in confusion. Sebastian’s eyes seemed redder than usual, like this topic offended him on a personal level.

“Why do you care whether I name it or not?” Ciel asked incredulously.

“I did notice that you have an unfortunate lack of imagination when it comes to giving names, Master,” Sebastian’s lips twisted in displeasure and Ciel suddenly had an idea.

“Are you dissatisfied with your name?”
Sebastian didn’t reply and Ciel chortled with amusement. Now this had never even occurred to him. Was Sebastian truly resentful of his name? He had appeared to accept it, especially when Ciel allowed him to pick the last name of his choice.

“This wasn’t a rhetorical question,” Ciel said sharply. “Answer me.”

“I don’t mind the name itself. However, I admit I’m confused by your reasoning. Why did you name me after a dog?”

The disgust underlying the last word was so palpable that Ciel almost snickered. However, his voice sounded cold when he said, “That dog hated me. He couldn’t stand even the sight of me and yet he was a perfect guard dog, never forgetting about his responsibilities. I expected the same of you.”

Annoyance left Sebastian’s face, melting into surprise.

“You named me after someone who hated you?” he asked slowly. Ciel met his gaze, careful to keep his expression even, thinking, ‘Eventually, the dog loved me. He loved me above everyone else and he was my source of comfort every time I needed it.’

Ciel had naively followed the association of comfort and safety when naming his demon, oblivious to how the first part of his story with the real Sebastian would reflect his relationship with the fake one.

Sebastian didn’t need to know the second part. It was irrelevant.

“That makes sense, doesn’t it?” he said aloud. “You are with me only because we are bound by the contract. You are obligated to protect me, just like the dog of the Phantomhive family was. And yet you still attempted to deceive me to terminate the contract early, so I’d say that in regard to fulfilling one’s duties, my real dog was superior.”

Sebastian’s lips tightened and his eyes narrowed, as if he disliked being reminded of his earlier behaviour.

“Besides,” Ciel added, “I asked what your actual name was. You told me to choose one myself.”

“Demons do not share their true names with humans,” Sebastian said condescendingly. The derisive curling of his mouth made Ciel stiffen, suddenly feeling disregarded and mocked. “The true name of a demon holds immense power that humans could use to their advantage were they to know it. We do not reveal even the names of the enemies if they’re of our kind. Not to the outsiders.”

“Really?” Forgetting about his irritation, Ciel leaned forward. “What would I be able to do if I knew your name?”

“The contract would be more powerful from your side. You would be able to actively oppose me and enforce your will even in circumstances where I would want to resist you. Names are considered intimate among my kind. We do not choose them and we are not given them — they are there from the moment we are born.”

There were many things Ciel wanted to ask. He’d give a lot to know whether Sebastian’s real name was mentioned in some of the ancient occult books, but it required more engagement than he was willing to demonstrate.

It didn’t matter, in the end. Sebastian wouldn’t share his name with him and Ciel wasn’t all that
interested in knowing the sordid details of his undoubtedly perverse life.

Sebastian was his pawn. Nothing more.

“Well, I’m not naming the game,” Ciel announced. “If you have such a penchant for naming things, you can do that yourself.”

“I’ll consider some options,” Sebastian agreed easily.

Without speaking another word, they went back to drawing.

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For four more days, there were no news from Lau, and Ciel spent them with Sebastian by his side, finishing their game. They created game pieces out of a chess set, covering them in a sticky mass they obtained after mixing the bits of newspapers with chalk and glue. As Ciel was working on the chess pieces, transforming them into gargoyles, Sebastian focused on constructing a silver-covered whirligig with numbers, which had to function as dices. They also finished painting the board, and when everything was done, they put all elements of the game together, observing their results.

“There’s still some of that glue left,” Ciel remarked. “I’ll make some London buildings out of it for decoration.”

Without waiting for a reply, he stepped closer to the board, studying the pictures Sebastian had painted as the ending.

At first he’d thought these were just some men and women sitting in a carriage, but the closer he looked, the more he realized that something’s wrong.

“Why are their faces so yellow?” he asked. The people were preceded by a wide reddish banner with strange letters on it. ‘Boaz’? What did it mean? The picture of people was followed by the ‘Happy End’ wording, but knowing Sebastian, there had to be a catch.

Sebastian didn’t reply immediately. When Ciel glanced at him for clarification, he saw a familiar all-knowing gaze coupled with a mysterious smile.

Well. Sebastian clearly didn’t intend to tell him anything.

Ciel glanced at the picture again, trying to absorb everything he saw on it. The banner, looking like a warning. Strange people. ‘Happy End’.

“They’re dead,” he concluded. “And that otherworldly half-thing you’ve drawn is going to drag their carriage straight into hell. So anyone who finishes the game is still going to die.”

“I thought you would appreciate such ending,” Sebastian uttered, looking pleased. “It’s fitting, isn’t it, my lord?”

“It is,” Ciel agreed. “But I don’t understand what ‘Boaz’ means. Is it from the Bible?”
“Not exactly,” Sebastian’s lips twitched. “It has several meanings. You may view it as something akin to ‘poisoned victory’.”

Ciel let out a thoughtful noise, still looking at the picture. He’d have to research the word later to understand what exactly Sebastian meant. Overall, he was satisfied with the game — it looked sufficiently scary and interesting, and his fingers burned with desire to touch the smooth surface and start the first match.

That was exactly when Lau knocked on the door.

Three hours later, Ciel found himself in a small, half-ruined room of the storage next to one of the biggest docks, pressed against Sebastian’s chest securely. According to Lau, this was where the major drug-dealing group had to discharge their secret cargo today, accompanied by the port workers who gave them clearance.

As Ciel had thought from the start, this was boring. Lau had done all the work and gave him information, and now all he had to do was wait. As soon as drug-dealers and port workers came in, Sebastian would enter the game. And then everything would be over.

“Young Master?” Sebastian murmured into his hair. “Is there anything in particular you would like me to do once they come?”

Ciel considered it carefully, trying to evaluate the impact of his decision from all sides.

On the one hand, he wasn’t thrilled at having to participate in a gruesome murder of some thugs. He despised drugs but they didn’t offend him as much as the majority of other crimes did.

On the other hand, he couldn’t realistically solve the problem of drugs transportation in all docks of London at once manually. The best option was to set an example for everyone, and to do that, the punishment had to be spectacular.

“Kill them in a way that will be remembered,” Ciel decided finally. “Leave one of the port workers alive, though. Understood?”

“I wouldn’t deserve to call myself a servant of the Phantomhive family if I couldn’t do that,” Sebastian assured him. Ciel couldn’t see his face from this angle but he knew Sebastian was smiling that deceptively friendly, dangerous smile of his.

Silence stretched, with nothing but occasional raindrops breaking it. Through the cracks in the doorway, only small shards of light went through, and eventually, it started lulling Ciel to sleep. Sebastian kept holding him so he would stay warm and Ciel pressed closer to him, letting his eyelids droop.

He was startled out of sleep by Sebastian’s whisper right against his ear, “My lord, they are here.”
Ciel clenched his cane and hastened to look through one of the cracks.

The room had indeed filled with people. Some were talking quietly, others were rolling several boxes inside, pushing them towards the back.

They looked ordinary. Pity that their cargo wasn’t.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Ciel grumbled. “Kill them.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian whispered. He clutched Ciel tighter in his arms for a moment, and then, before Ciel could even understand what’s happening, he was standing on his own feet, near the drug dealers. Sebastian was nowhere to be found but Ciel didn’t let it disturb him — by now, he was familiar with at least a dozen of Sebastian’s game scenarios.

“Who is that?” one of the men exclaimed, pointing at him.

“Some thief, probably,” another man growled, narrowing his eyes at Ciel. “Get lost, kid.”

Ciel snorted derisively, crossing his arms together.

“Your eyesight is failing you,” he stated coldly. “You can’t even recognise who you are talking to?”

“He’s dressed too well to be a thief,” someone hissed. “Get rid of him, now!”

There was a loud yelp and the central door suddenly closed. Ciel smiled with the corner of his lips, leaning against his cane.

“What’s happening?” the same man who’d addressed him asked, backing away.

“That would be my butler,” Ciel replied helpfully, and as soon as he finished saying it, the screams started.

He didn’t get any particular pleasure from watching the men who had just been breathing being torn apart, but looking away would mean weakness that Ciel couldn’t afford. For this reason, he observed Sebastian’s performance coolly, wrinkling his nose as the smell of blood, wetness, and urine reached him. Sebastian was clearly having fun, jumping from one man to another, leaving mutilated bodies behind, moving so swiftly that no matter how hard Ciel tried, he couldn’t track his motions adequately.

At first, he couldn’t tell how Sebastian had chosen to design this scene. Only when a handful of men were left, Ciel noticed that each body was missing a different limb. Some lacked legs, others lacked hands, and the mouths of all of them seemed split from ear to ear.

It looked rather impressive, Ciel had to admit it. Normally, he disapproved of blood shows, but he needed something that would be remembered and this would do nicely.

Soon, all the screams died out. Only terrified whimpering from one of the corners remained, from the port worker that Ciel had ordered to keep alive.

Sebastian glanced at him, looking sated and otherworldly. His eyes were still burning an unnatural red and Ciel frowned, silently ordering him to control himself. Sebastian, it seemed, understood his command because he bowed, and when he looked up again, his eyes were back to normal.

“Arrange everything,” Ciel said curtly. As Sebastian busied himself with it, he walked towards the
port worker, stopping one step from him.

“What is your name?” he asked. The man raised his half-crazed eyes, shaking so badly that his teeth were chattering.

“J-James,” he mumbled.

“Did you see what happened here?”

James stared helplessly, obviously trying to guess what kind of answer Ciel was expecting.

“The truth,” Ciel demanded harshly and James flinched back so hard that he hit his head against the wall.

Honestly.

“I—I I saw,” he whimpered. “That unholy thing… it… it killed everyone. Please…”

“Unholy thing indeed,” Ciel agreed, sensing Sebastian’s annoyance with his back and barely keeping himself from smiling. “Do you know who I am?”

James tried to answer, but even though his lips moved, no sound escaped.

“Probably not,” Ciel concluded. “I’m Earl Phantomhive, the Watchdog of Her Majesty. You will leave with your life today but only for one reason. I want you to warn everyone about what will happen to those who transport the drugs and those who allow such ships to discharge. Tell them that if I hear of even one such activity, they will meet the same fate. I won’t tolerate drug dealing within the districts entrusted to me by Her Majesty. Those who do not heed my warning will be punished. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes,” James whispered, staring at him as if Ciel was the devil himself. “I will tell them.”

“Good. Sebastian?”

“All done, my lord,” Sebastian bowed his head and Ciel looked over the picture they were going to leave for Randall and other port workers to find. The bodies were now piled up one over the other, and the severed limbs formed the second pile, placed in the opposite corner.

Cheap but effective enough to frighten their audience. Ciel nodded in approval and watched how Sebastian’s fangs glistened as he grinned at him.

“Do you think that would be sufficient to stop the drug trafficking, Master?” Sebastian asked as they left the port. Ciel shrugged.

“It will work for a while,” he said. “There will always be some desperate individuals who will still try to transport the drugs to London, regardless of their fear. After several months, the story of what happened today will look like a scary tale to those who weren’t personally involved and they will still try to make easy money. So, it will be efficient to a degree. However, that’s all I need and all I can realistically do.”

Sebastian nodded but his face remained inscrutable, so it was difficult to understand whether he agreed with him or not. Whatever he was thinking, though, he wasn’t going to share it, and Ciel wasn’t going to push.

All he wanted to do at this moment was to get home and test their new game — and to sleep
Contrary to Ciel’s hopes, a nightmare did come. He hadn’t found Sebastian’s display at the port overly shocking but it seemed that his mind disagreed.

He hated blood.

The nightmare was familiar, the same type he’d had for months after his release, but as always, it felt terrifyingly real. The light from the candles was tearing mercilessly into his eyes, almost blinding him, and the only thing he could do was listen to the voices.

He knew what each intonation meant. He recognised each rise and fall, each laugh and the person it belonged to. It was vital to know these things. It helped him to understand when they were going to come and when he was going to be chosen — and what for.

He never knew which option was worse, to be ‘prepared’, as they called it, or to be finally sacrificed.

This inability to decide fuelled madness in him. Madness that was quickly devoured by hatred so strong, he felt he could burst with it.

Finally, he heard the intonations he’d been dreading, the sounds that combined themselves into the sound of his name, and he screamed like he always did — screamed for help that wouldn’t be coming.

Someone squeezed his hand suddenly. The sensation was new and unexpected, and it tore Ciel from his nightmare in a matter of seconds. However, the reality was equally oppressive because he didn’t recognise the touch. It didn’t belong to Sebastian, which made whomever touched him an enemy.

“Get away from me!” Ciel yelled, yanking his hand away viciously. He was still disoriented but he knew someone was near, someone who wasn’t Sebastian, someone who wasn’t welcome. “Don’t touch me!”

“I’m sorry! Young Master, it’s me, Bard. Do you know who I am?”

“Bard?” Ciel gasped. “Where’s Sebastian?”

“You sent him to Lord Randall. Do you remember? To deliver some news.”

…Right. He had deliberately chosen the night for his message to rattle Randall even further.

Ciel breathed carefully, in and out. Bard had brought Sebastian’s candelabra with him and the light from it was enough for him to see the clock.

Sebastian had left just twenty minutes ago. He’d managed to have a nightmare like that in about
fifteen minutes of sleep?

The seed of fury at himself burned in Ciel’s chest, quickly turning into a kernel of full-blown resentment. He clenched his fists, digging his fingers into his skin sharply, and only then did he remember about Bard.

“Why did you come into my room?” Ciel demanded to know. Bard looked sheepish at the accusation in his voice. He made a step back and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

“I heard your screaming,” he murmured. “I’m sorry, Master. As Sebastian was out of the house, I wasn’t sure what to do. If you want me to leave—”

Ciel considered this suggestion for a moment. Then he stared at Bard, who looked out of place but painfully sincere, and discarded it.

“No,” he said. “Stay.”

Bard nodded, adjusted the candelabra, then shifted uncomfortably. He was obviously at a loss as to what to do now that Ciel had ordered him to stay, but to his credit, he gathered himself rather quickly.

“Want to talk about your dreams?” he asked.

“No,” Ciel replied curtly. Bard rubbed the back of his neck again, looking even more uncomfortable, and then, just as suddenly, he smiled.

“I can tell you about mine,” he offered. “I’ve been battling them for years, so I know a few tricks. Maybe they could help you.”

Ciel thought about denying that he needed help, but just like the last time, he chose against it. Talking didn’t mean admitting to being weak, did it? And talking about such things with a demon who did not even understand the concept of nightmares was unthinkable.

“Fine,” Ciel uttered, and blinked in astonishment when Bard sat right on the edge of his bed. For a moment, he was torn between getting offended and letting it go, and reluctantly, he picked the latter.

Bard was a simple man. He obviously had little idea of what boundaries between masters and their servants were, and scolding him would only reduce his desire to be useful.

“You know I was at the battlefield,” Bard said. “I saw death every day. I went to the military to help the civilians. My family was killed in one of the military raids, so I hoped I’d be able to protect someone else the way I didn’t protect them. But eventually, I only lost more people I loved.”

An uneasy feeling washed over Ciel, making him look away briefly. He was unsure of what expression to take, what to feel in response to Bard’s confessions.

He didn’t remember the last time someone talked about his feelings so openly. Admitting to feeling guilt, to loving someone? How could Bard just say it so effortlessly, as if it wasn’t difficult?

Bard paused, probably giving him time to say something, and when Ciel didn’t, he went on.

“They come to my dreams often. Sometimes these are good dreams. Sometimes they are… yeah,”
Bard sighed heavily, reached for his cigar. Then remembered where he was and jerked his hand back.

“You said you know some ‘tricks’ to help with the nightmares,” Ciel reminded him.

“Yeah,” Bard repeated, livelier this time. “Of course, what works for me might not work for you, but dreams are dreams, right? So back when I was with the military, I had a friend, Jess. We used to share a tent with some other soldiers. Every time I started tossing and turning, he crawled to me and squeezed my hand. Lightly at first, then increasing the pressure, up until I woke up. It didn’t help at first, mind you. I nearly took his head off during those first times. But Jess was the only person who had ever tried to help me and he always sat with me afterwards, just talking and distracting me. With time, I started associating the hand squeeze with safety because I knew what would follow. Maybe you could find the same anchor, eh? You could ask Sebastian to do something like that whenever you’re having a nightmare.”

‘Sebastian is my anchor,’ Ciel thought sourly, his careful hope crashing back into miserable, lonely pieces.

Sebastian was the only being that stayed by his side during his nightmares. His so-called comfort was the coldest and most impersonal thing Ciel had ever seen, and yet his mind still latched onto it, craving his presence and his familiar smell, absurdly associating them with safety.

Sebastian had tried to mimic Bard to soothe him last time, failing to understand that any touch of his and even his mere presence would have the same effect. Obviously, Ciel could never say it, but the association was there and he couldn’t remove it no matter how hard he tried.

He doubted he could create a new, Sebastian-unrelated association. Not after all this time.

“Want me to tell you some funny stories?” Bard asked, and Ciel snorted incredulously. He doubted he would find Bard’s idea of humour funny but he didn’t want to go back to sleep yet.

It looked like Bard was learning to interpret his answers based on his silence because he nodded as if Ciel had said something and grinned.

“Let’s start with my first raid,” he declared.

Like Ciel had anticipated, he didn’t find the first story funny at all. The second one was better. The third made him smile reluctantly, but after the fourth one, he laughed, quietly but heartfeltedly.

His laughter was cut short by the sound of the door slamming open. Jerking from the abruptness of it, Ciel tried to look only for his view to be blocked by Bard, who jumped from the bed and shielded him protectively.

“Oh, it’s you, Sebastian,” Bard uttered, the relief palpable in his voice. He moved away and Ciel caught a glimpse of Sebastian… and frowned.

Sebastian didn’t look human. He was still in a human shape, clearly, and since Bard didn’t seem to react, it probably wasn’t anything particularly revealing, but by now, Ciel knew him enough to notice the tiniest signs.

The stillness with which Sebastian was standing on the threshold was unnatural. He didn’t appear to be breathing, a human characteristic that he’d always imitated successfully, and under this stillness, the pieces of darkness were brewing, entwining and coiling together, preparing to attack.

“Bard,” Sebastian said, and his voice, usually deceptively soft, was laced with explicit menace. It
promised cruelty at the slightest sign of disobedience. “Leave. Now.”

Bard must have caught up on this promise because he backed away to Ciel in what appeared to be an instinctive reaction, and when Sebastian’s eyes narrowed, he swallowed audibly.

“S-sure,” he murmured. “Have a good night, Master. Sebastian.”

Ciel didn’t react, watching Sebastian with a frown. When Bard left, some stillness bled out of him, but then he moved towards the bed and Ciel could distinctly hear the sound of the heels clicking.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, perplexed.

“Not at all, my lord,” Sebastian smiled, but his smile was biting and icy, and Ciel shivered involuntarily.

Sebastian looked at him as if he despised him, as if he would like nothing more than to break his neck.

When he approached, Ciel stared, wondering if he was about to do just that. His stupid body refused to recognise Sebastian as a threat, though, and while his heart clenched painfully, every other part of him relaxed, succumbing to the illusion of safety.

Sebastian smoothed the bed sheet where Bard had been sitting and straightened again, still smiling.

Ciel wished he didn’t. This? This wasn’t a smile. This was a snarl of a predator that hated him and that was considering to tear him apart, just like he did to the men at the port.

“Another nightmare, Young Master?” Sebastian asked, his every word emanating fake sweetness. “I’ll bring you some hot milk. You shouldn’t be awake at this hour.”

Ciel couldn’t force himself to reply. He just stared as Sebastian left the room, wide-eyed and startled and afraid.

What was that?

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter - Sebastian's POV covering all major events that happened so far as well as the events of E1 of S1. We've finally reached canon! :D
Sebastian. Transitioning. Part 1

Chapter Notes

Hi! As always, thank you all for your tremendous support, it's incredibly motivating! I was so excited about it and about Sebastian's POV that I've managed to complete the next chapter early. However, it ended up being around 20K, so I had to break it into two parts :)

Warning for some creepiness here! Sebastian is... well. Sebastian.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ciel Phantomhive was the most confounding blend of contradictions that Sebastian had encountered in his devilishly long existence.

From the very first second he felt that unique, twisted soul, he was enthralled. The blinding light it emanated wasn’t dulled by the bitter dark stains spreading across its surface, not in the slightest. How something so pure and innocent could have such dark edges, Sebastian didn’t know, and he didn’t particularly care.

The pureness formed the essence of this soul, making it into white canvas waiting to be filled with intricate, exquisite patterns. The shadowy stains that already darkened some of its bits spoke of pride, mercilessness, coldness, and rage, rage so profound that Sebastian couldn’t believe it belonged to such a young soul. The darkest spot marked hatred and hostility, and the flavour of this peculiar combination was entirely maddening, making him salivate.

He thirsted for this soul. This soul was worthy of forming a contract, and by the time he was finished with it, it would be even more delicious — bitterer, sweeter, and spicier. The best meal he’d had so far.

The wish of his new Master was rather bland but Sebastian was willing to entertain it because for someone as young, seeking revenge was almost refreshing. He destroyed the vermin that must have fuelled the boy’s rage right in front of him, showcasing his abilities and proving his worth, and when he put his mark on the boy’s eye, he felt satisfaction well up in his chest.

This soul was his now. Now, it wouldn’t be able to escape, and if it tried, he would follow.

“I have three additional requests,” the boy declared, glaring at him defiantly, as if challenging him to object. Sebastian let his lips twist in an ironic smile. Didn’t this strange creature know that now that the contract had been formed, all new conditions were void?

However, he was feeling generous today, after finding such a compelling meal, so he chose to humour the boy.

“Whatever you wish for, my lord,” he murmured, grimacing internally at how insincere his words sounded. His Master’s eyes narrowed suddenly and Sebastian almost frowned.

Could it be that… No. The boy couldn’t have sensed the disingenuousness of his obedience. No human, especially a child, was capable of distinguishing between the lies and the truths when
speaking to a demon, regardless of how unique their soul was.

“I want you to always protect me,” his Master said solemnly, throwing a quick glance at the piles of crumpled corpses covering the floor. “Protect me and never betray me,” he added quickly. “Not until I fulfil my revenge. My orders are absolute and you must obey me unconditionally. Also, I forbid you to ever lie to me. Understood?”

Unconditional obedience was something the boy had already demanded, back when they were forming a contract. Technically, Sebastian mused, it meant that all other orders would have to be followed immediately as well, so the boy’s additional requirements weren’t necessary. Still, as expected, he hadn’t been very clear when expressing his wishes, so Sebastian could easily find a way around each of the demands apart from the revenge itself if needed.

But he would do anything to look like a perfect butler in the boy’s eyes. He would earn his soul — as long as it remained worthy of being cultivated.

It would make this game much more interesting.

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When the plate with the lunch he had worked so hard on was thrown into his face, for a moment, Sebastian was too stunned to react. He stared at his Master, knowing that his face must look blank from the shock, and tried to process this new indignity.

The boy was refreshingly demanding and surprisingly vicious in his requests for perfection. At first, he had been reprimanding Sebastian for his failures; then, he began to throw the inadequate dishes on the floor, making Sebastian clean up. Throwing them into his face, though? That was new and Sebastian couldn’t say it was pleasant.

“You skilfully imitated the appearance but it’s just colouring,” his Young Master stated coldly. “The flavour is insipid.”

Feeling how the disgusting blend of food started to drip from his face, Sebastian had to take a second to corral a sudden desire to snap the boy’s neck. Granted, it wouldn’t be the first time he’d killed one of his Masters, but not in such circumstances. Furthermore, less than a week had passed since they formed their contract. He never cared about the position he held among other demons, yet breaking the contract so soon? Unacceptable.

“I apologise,” Sebastian uttered, lowering his eyes in submission even though he knew the boy couldn’t see him. “I’ll bring a new one immediately.”

He walked to the door but the boy’s voice stopped him, and this time, it sounded even colder.

“I made a contract with you. If you’re going to be a butler, perform your duties properly.”

Anger was a feeling Sebastian had almost forgotten. His existence had been mundane and passionless for so long that even the slightest stirring of something other than hunger was a revelation.
He might be an imperfect demon among his own kind but among humans? Humans were so easy to impress. It never required any effort, and yet during the last four days, the disagreeable child he was serving had showered him with more insults than he had received in his whole life. Worse than the insults and constant humiliating tasks was genuine displeasure Sebastian could sense within him.

His Young Master wasn’t simply being difficult, he was truly dissatisfied with his services. Apart from being unimpressed, he viewed Sebastian as something inferior, and the thought of it was enough to send weak, unexpectedly warm sparks of anger through him.

Interesting.

Sebastian went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and resumed cooking.

He would get this right. The irritating child was going to appreciate every meal Sebastian prepared and he would ask for extra servings. Sebastian would achieve this regardless of the cost, even if he had to waste another ton of human ingredients.

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“Wrong,” Sebastian concluded, frowning at the scroll of paper his Master had passed to him. “Only three out of eight calculations are correct. You are abysmally inattentive and your handwriting leaves a lot to be desired. Is that number one or number seven?”

“One,” the boy grumbled sourly.

“You’ll have to redo five calculations and rewrite all that on a clean sheet. Now, hands open.”

The boy stared at him in confusion.

“What do you mean, ‘hands open’?” he asked, and Sebastian showed him the cane, smiling. His Master’s eye widened.

“You are going to hit me?” he exclaimed incredulously. “But my parents never—” He fell silent without finishing his phrase, still staring at the cane in disbelief.

“I told you I’m a strict teacher,” Sebastian remarked. “In your circumstances, Young Master, you have to learn twice as fast as you normally would. Imposing punishment for every mistake is an effective way to ensure that your attention does not waver.”

The boy bit his lip nervously. Uncertainty and fear that so palpably seeped into his veins were intoxicating and Sebastian inhaled deeply, letting the bitter flavour spread through his lungs.

When his Master finally held out his hands, Sebastian was unable to stop a hungry grin from emerging. He raised the cane and struck, deliberately catching the slim fingers for the impact to be more profound. Gasping, the boy recoiled from him, pressing his injured hand to his chest and staring at him with such a betrayed look that the pleasure from it threatened to become overwhelming. Sebastian raised his eyebrow, waiting, watching how his Master’s lower lip began to tremble.
Would he cry? The strike had been undoubtedly painful, especially for a fragile child like this. The unexpectedness of it also had to play its role, stirring emotions that the boy didn’t want to display.

What would he do if Sebastian asked him to hold his hands open again?

He could always check.

“One more strike,” Sebastian drawled, drinking in the flare of shock and fury in the boy’s eye.

‘Cry,’ he urged him silently as a thin thread of darkness separated from him, striving to reach the boy and absorb every painful emotion he was experiencing.

How would his tears taste?

“Fine,” his Master said suddenly, and Sebastian blinked, taken aback.

He hadn’t expected him to agree, certainly not after the reaction he’d gotten. But the boy was holding his hands open again, glaring, so Sebastian raised the cane and inflicted another strike, this time missing the fingers.

The boy said nothing. He pulled out a clean sheet of paper and began to write again, very neatly, even though his hands were shaking.

Sebastian couldn’t take his eyes off him for the rest of the lesson, surprised and reluctantly impressed.

The boy was stubborn. He was obviously holding himself to the same high standards he required from Sebastian, which was more than could be said about all his previous Masters.

Yes, this soul was indeed worthy of his attention.

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“Sebastian? Hands open.”

Another almost forgotten, vaguely familiar sensation shooting up in his chest. Astonishment. Genuine and absolutely unexpected, stronger than any feeling of surprise he’d experienced so far.

Sebastian stepped to the table, holding out his hands obediently, still doubtful that the boy would do this, and the next moment, scorching hot liquid covered his fingers, boiling his skin and sending weak moans of pain through his body.

“This isn’t tea,” his Master said darkly, scowling at him. “This is coloured water. Start over.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian bowed slightly, retreating to the kitchen. The darkness in him hissed angrily — he could see a shadowy glimpse of his wings that tried to bleed through his human form, demanding retribution. Being punished by a child, in such a humiliating way… Sebastian would prefer getting stabbed or shot to this.
Despite his outrage, though, he only chuckled and waved the darkness away. How unpredictable and deliciously malicious his Master could be...

Sebastian closed his eyes, imagining how a soul of such a unique being would taste.

For some reason, he felt positively sure that the second cup of tea was going to be thrown at him again even if he did manage to prepare something to his Master’s liking.

Two strikes with the cane, two instances of scorching.

His Master was vindictive, no doubts about that.

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“Stay with me,” the child blurted, wide-eyed and scared, shaking from the aftermath of his dreams, and Sebastian struggled to stop his lips from curling downwards.

Nightmares. How boring. The nights were supposed to be the time when he could rest from the unending demands and stop pretending to be a human, but his little Master seemed set on possessing even this part of his schedule.

He murmured the words of agreement, took the candelabra, and approached the window. The boy sent him a sad glance and Sebastian sensed how something flickered in his soul, a strong and undecipherable longing for something. It was so potent that Sebastian tilted his head curiously, waiting for an order of some kind, but all the boy did was bury himself under the blanket and close his eyes.

Humans were immensely fascinating but understanding them had never been a problem. Until now.

What was the boy thinking? A failure to understand his own Master equalled a failure to perform his duties adequately, and this other example of his imperfection annoyed Sebastian more than he was willing to admit.

Better to put the entire issue to rest swiftly. If he came up with a solution to stop his Master’s nightmares from occurring, he could have his nights back, without having to play a concerned servant who had to check whether everything was fine every time the boy awoke.

All he had to do was learn what having nightmares meant.

The next morning, Sebastian stayed by his Master’s side unwaveringly, leaving only to prepare, serve, and remake the meals. According to the facts he’d gathered, nightmares were caused by irrational fears and insecurity, so if he remained close to his Master during the day, offering silent protection, his nights would be undisturbed.

There was only one flaw in this plan, and it was the child himself.

“Stop following me around like a dog,” he growled, and Sebastian frowned, not sure why his efforts were being disregarded once again.
“I only wish for my Master to feel safe,” he said as gently as he could, and the child gasped in outrage.

“I don’t need you to stalk me for that! If the intruders come, you will deal with them as always. Other than that, only come when I call for you. I don’t want to have to see you more than that — and stop standing so close! You’re suffocating me!”

Frustration was another new feeling that was quickly becoming familiar to him. Sebastian bowed, curious at the small flares of indignation that kept heating his blood, and left to start preparing the lunch.

Maybe the boy enjoyed having nightmares and did not wish to recover from them. It was preferable to the idea that Sebastian had misunderstood something again.

This time, in a hundredth attempt to prepare an edible meal for his Master, Sebastian brought a book with recipes to the kitchen. He’d found it in the vast library of the manor and while the majority of the recipes looked peculiar at best, there was one that attracted his attention. It was underlined with red ink, accompanied by the words “Ciel’s favourite”.

If he managed to cook at least one good meal, he would be able to figure out the boy’s preferences and adjust to them accordingly. This hateful process would certainly become more tolerable after that.

Sebastian ignored his own ideas and beliefs entirely this time, following the underlined recipe word by word. Half of the ingredients seemed immiscible to him but he still added them, half-expecting everything to blow up in his face.

Strangely, no such thing happened. When Sebastian served the meal to his Master, he was rewarded with a suspicious glance. The boy tasted his lunch, chewed, swallowed, and then stared at Sebastian, the disbelief written plainly on his face.

“This is actually eatable!” he exclaimed, and a foreign, tickling warmth bloomed in Sebastian’s chest.

Pleasure.

He’d never had to work hard to achieve success before. Who would have thought that after all those struggles, the victory would taste so sweet?

“I’m pleased that it satisfies you, Master,” Sebastian said, for the first time feeling nothing but sincerity.

Cooking had been the most difficult part of his tasks, and now that he had a specific recipe as a basis, it was bound to get far more engaging.

His Master would ask for the extra serving. Very soon.

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The child began to smile at him. At first, Sebastian believed it to be a reaction to their mutual progress — they both had improved significantly in execution of their duties, but the more time passed, the more grating those smiles became.

His Master was losing the edge that kept Sebastian fascinated. The kaleidoscope of new, unexplored feelings that he found refreshing was rapidly fading, replaced by more than familiar sensations of boredom and revulsion.

He had been mistaken in his evaluation of the boy’s soul. He might have appeared merciless and intriguing at first, and he had been delightfully suspicious and demanding of him for a while, but now, apparently, he began to get used to his company, and this softened him to an intolerable extent.

The sharpness was gone from his voice when he was issuing orders. He began to reach out for Sebastian like a small, affection-starved puppy, and the more he sought out his presence, the harder Sebastian tried to avoid him.

It was sickening to see what his almost perfect soul had turned into. He should have thought twice before forming a contract: the minds of children were undergoing constant changes, so what he bargained for one day could transform drastically tomorrow.

One thing was clear — this child wasn’t worthy of all the efforts Sebastian had invested into serving him. A few more months and he would forget about his revenge, which would give Sebastian a perfect opportunity to devour him. This soul would be a mere quick snack instead of a flavourful meal he had been looking forward to, but it was just as well. He could always search for a new, worthier Master.

He got his excuse sooner than he’d expected. The letter from the Queen herself had arrived, inviting the boy for a ceremony, and standing at the back of the room, watching him being officially recognised as an Earl, Sebastian felt peaceful. Their contract was coming to an end, he could already sense it. Today or tomorrow, it was going to happen — his Master was going to slip up.

The boy chose this exact moment to turn and seek Sebastian out with his eye, as if to make sure that he was watching, and a pleasant anticipation began to buzz in Sebastian’s veins softly.

Today, then.

He smiled at the boy, gently and affectionately, and received a beaming look in response.

What a weak-willed, malleable little human.

“The status, the fortune, the beautiful fiancée — they are all yours now,” Sebastian was saying, keeping his eyes downcast to hide a hungry glow that he knew was burning in them. “So how about it? Would you throw away such foolishness as revenge and live on in happiness like this?”

“That doesn’t sound bad,” the boy agreed, and it was all Sebastian needed. Parting his lips in a snarl, he reached for his Master, uncaring that his body started losing its human appearance, emanating the first curls of darkness.

His claws almost pierced the boy’s nape, his body thrumming in ravenous anticipation, when a harsh word broke through his haze.
“But!”

The boy turned to face him at this very second and Sebastian had barely managed to retract his hand.

“I didn’t return to attain happiness,” he said, his voice brimming with a quiet, fierce determination. “I came back to fight.”

What?

Sebastian stared at him, dumbstruck, as more and more unfamiliar feelings flooded him, stronger than anything he’d experienced in centuries.

“There is no other way to go but forward,” the boy added darkly. “I swear on this damned name of mine that I will attain my revenge!”

Sebastian knew he must have made some noise, but for the hell of him, he couldn’t remember what it was. Something shifted in his chest, twisting the very core of him, unchaining it and centring it on the boy who stood in front of him, the boy whose soul was lit with a grim, blinding glow of darkness.


He was mistaken. Whatever weakness the boy had shown, it was only an echo of who he truly was — an echo that could be squashed easily.

This was indeed the soul he’d entered the contract with. This boy was indeed his Master.

For the first time in his existence, Sebastian dropped to his knee willingly, not because he had to dress or bathe the boy, but because he was acknowledging the respect he induced. He had never knelt before any of his previous Masters, not unless ordered to, but here, now, he felt almost powerless in the face of these new, astonishing feelings.

“Yes, my lord,” he said, not having to fake the reverence in his voice. The boy held out his hand and Sebastian accepted it readily, clenching it in his. “I will definitely deliver you the crown of victory,” he promised before brushing his lips against the small, gloved hand, breathing in the scent of the heated skin that no fabric could hide.

Yes, he would obtain that crown for his Master. He would treat his wish with utmost seriousness and he would be the most perfect butler any human could dream of.

He would cultivate this soul, and when the time came, he would absorb it piece by the twitching piece, revelling in the despair and horror that would inevitably follow the boy as he realised that everything was over.

It would be well worth the wait indeed.
The boy was far more perceptive than Sebastian had believed. It was difficult to say how he’d managed to figure everything out during their trip home, but he had — and he demanded answers.

Initially, Sebastian thought it would be amusing to watch how his Master reacted to the truth. For this reason, he easily confessed his intention to trick and devour him today, wondering if the delectable look of betrayal he’d seen on the boy’s face when he first hit him during their lessons would return.

It did, but the reaction that came afterwards was the last thing Sebastian had expected.

In retrospect, he should have been vaguer in his response.

He was so busy with dinner preparations that he’d missed how the boy left the house. When the seal on his hand suddenly burned, Sebastian felt his eyes widen in disbelief. Then he dashed to where the boy was, trying to understand how he could have possibly missed the intruders but failing.

He would have sensed someone approaching. No, whatever danger his Master was in, it had to be accidental or self-inflicted.

Sebastian managed to get to the cliff just on time to catch the falling boy. Pressing him hard against his chest, he jerked back up and delivered him on the top, staring at him like at the surprising, impossible creature he was.

“Why on earth would you do something like that?” he asked. He truly didn’t understand. Just today, the boy had declared his intention to see his revenge through, and now he was trying to kill himself?

“I was checking whether you are worthy of consuming my soul,” his Master told him, and a hot wave of shock ran through Sebastian’s body, rendering him speechless.

The boy had flung himself off the cliff to check whether he would manage to save him? What insanity was that?

No matter how hard he tried, Sebastian couldn’t understand the motivation for such irrational decision. Had his Master begun to doubt his power? But there were safer ways to test his abilities, ones that didn’t involve a risk for his life.

Intrigued, he leaned closer, wondering if the scent of the boy’s emotions could give him a hint. However, before he could try to sort through them, a small hand collided with his cheek with a surprising strength.

It wasn’t particularly painful but it did send his body into stupor. Sebastian stared, all his senses shutting down for a while to process this incomprehensible action.

He listened to the boy’s cold, vehement words, and each of them fluttered somewhere in his chest, causing a warm, quivering sensation to rise within it. By the time the boy finished, Sebastian felt drunk on emotions his own body was producing, all new and exciting, born out of genuine shock. It wasn’t easy to take him aback yet his Master managed to do that over and over again. And his soul, mouth-wateringly flavourful, smelled even better now, its colour darkening to a misty white, thick and difficult to see through.

His fascination, rekindled after today, flared stronger, brighter, turning into thirst so intense that it crossed the threshold of interest, gaining the form of obsession.
This was the first night that Sebastian spent in the anticipation of the morning, eager to be close to his Master again so that he could marvel at the renewed, incredible fragrance of his soul.

To his unpleasant surprise, in the morning, his Master wanted nothing to do with him.

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In the course of the next week, Sebastian was forced to acknowledge that the dynamic between him and his Young Master had changed. The boy was cold, collected, and distant, refusing to even look at him without a need. Gone were the smiles and softer looks: now Sebastian’s company was palpably unwanted. And ironically, the more the boy pulled away, the stronger Sebastian’s urge to follow him was.

Who would have thought that he would start craving the impressed look on his Master’s face? So far, the boy had looked genuinely impressed only once, when Sebastian had restored the manor. If he had known how rare this look was back then, he would have treasured it. Now, it seemed, he was stuck with reserved, half-hearted expressions of approval at best and open contempt and avoidance at the majority of times. On the one hand, it was certainly preferable to the insults thrown at him during that first month, but it was also significantly less than he’d had a week ago.

Normally, Sebastian didn’t care about the attitudes of his Masters to him. Despite the possibility of soaking in their bitter emotions and staying sated to a degree, he preferred to keep his distance. The child, though… the child was different. Perhaps due to the fact that he constantly challenged Sebastian’s perception of him, blowing cold, warm, and now cold again, mixing all his notions and managing to surprise him time and time again.

Sebastian liked being surprised. Making him unable to predict what to expect was the biggest gift that any living being could bestow on him, so while several days ago, the boy’s growing clinginess repulsed him, now Sebastian wished to be in his presence himself.

“Today for dessert, I have prepared a double-chocolate sponge cake with strawberry sauce and hazelnut truffles,” he uttered, presenting a plate with a large piece to his Master. The boy had an alarming appetite for sweets that Sebastian had to regulate, but at the moment, he was willing to allow him a particularly generous serving.

He waited patiently until his Master looked away from the thick book he was reading and glanced at the dessert offered to him. No emotion touched his face, though — he simply focused on the book again, throwing a curt, “Dismissed.”

Two feelings that were becoming rapidly familiar, frustration and disappointment, sent a rush of dark sweetness through Sebastian, and he bowed before retreating, marvelling at the strange mix of dejection, thirst, and curiosity that seemed to settle somewhere in his chest.

Interesting. After all the time spent with this boy, he was growing quite a collection of feelings and emotions that had never graced him with their presence before.

His tendency to become obsessed with the strangest things had alienated him from many demons, but Sebastian had never regretted the impulses that led him. Right now, he truly wanted to be a perfect butler for the boy. He learned his Master’s gastronomic tastes perfectly and could
experiment with the recipes now, devising more and more complex dishes. However, when it came to emotions… Sebastian had already met three versions of the boy. One was suspicious, meticulous, and cold; another one was semi-open and almost friendly, and the last one was vicious, vindictive, and distant. Forming one clear picture was impossible at this point, and it equally frustrated and captivated him.

Perhaps a riding lesson would please him, Sebastian mused. Despite the iciness the boy was emanating lately, one thing remained unchangeable — his delight at being praised. He was demonstrating a remarkable progress during riding lessons, so it was Sebastian’s best bet.

He wondered if with a little pressure, a fourth version of his Master would appear, with a new set of contradictory characteristics.

He couldn’t wait to find out.

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“I could solve this case for you,” Sebastian offered indulgently, studying the boy’s pale face. “All you have to do is give me an order. You won’t have to question anyone in the underworld and you’ll be able to report to the Queen today.”

The boy gasped, probably in relief, and Sebastian’s lips stretched in a small, condescending smirk.

He hadn’t missed his Master’s wariness and anxiety as he received the Queen’s letter. Sebastian had learned everything he could about the Phantomhives, but despite the boy’s family’s reputation, he himself was a child. An atypical and complex child, but a child still. He wasn’t capable of running around London solving crimes, and despite his attempts to pretend he understood anything in the dealings of the underworld, Sebastian knew it was a lie.

The boy needed his help but Sebastian wasn’t willing to assist him until he admitted his helplessness himself. This was more amusing.

“Who do you take me for?” his Master snarled at him suddenly, and Sebastian frowned, puzzled.

The gasp hadn’t been caused by relief, then. It seemed he had miscalculated again.

“My lord…”

“I asked you to sort through the letters so that I could know who cooperated with my predecessor and who were likely to cooperate with me. I don’t need you to solve anything for me! I can do that myself. I will require your assistance only in technical matters, where thinking isn’t needed. You’re a pawn, nothing more! Don’t delude yourself!”

_He_ was the one deluding himself?

Annoyed, Sebastian passed the letters he’d picked to the boy, smiling cordially to mask his scorn. He would enjoy seeing him fail.
Sebastian had served more Masters than he could recall. Thousands of faces had already faded from his memory; hundreds remained blurred, and only some of them still lived in his memory.

Ciel Phantomhive, Sebastian thought, would belong to the last category.

Technically, all demons could consume souls without necessarily forming a contract. However, unless they were young, such activities were frowned upon. It attracted the attention of the Shinigami and could damage the status of the demon. Sebastian had never been fond of the official rules and laws, but his position in the hierarchy was too high for him to disregard them entirely. So he formed contracts, usually short-term ones, choosing the blandest of souls with the simplest of wishes. Sating his hunger had been his sole goal for centuries and when he finally decided to change his habits, it turned out that finding unique souls that were willing to bargain with a demon was a daunting task.

Those he did find managed to hold his interest for a few months at most, and even they chose to transfer all their responsibilities to him. Ciel Phantomhive was the first who was ready to fight, risk, and bleed for the sake of his reputation — the reputation he intended to build himself, relying on Sebastian only when he absolutely had to.

Incredulous, Sebastian watched how his Master crept out of the house, clearly trying to remain unnoticed by him. Unable to imagine what he could be thinking, Sebastian followed quietly as his surprise and fascination shone brighter, filling his blood with a pleasant rush of something he couldn’t yet define.

He wanted to catch the boy, pull him close, curl around him and crush him, until every thought he had left his mind, baring themselves to Sebastian.

He needed to know them. He craved them.

When the boy stopped at the café where their murderer was working, Sebastian realised what was happening. When he saw the said murderer slide towards the oblivious boy, another new feeling joined his growing collection.

Uncertainty.

Based on the contract, he had to protect the boy — however, unless the boy was under the direct threat of dying, he didn’t necessarily have to interfere. Not to mention that it was the boy’s idea to escape without warning him, staying quiet so Sebastian wouldn’t be able to stop him.

What should he do? Warn the boy? Eliminate the attacker? Wait?

Too many possibilities. Some more intriguing than the others.

His seal began to throb, but Sebastian didn’t react. Dispassionately, he watched how his Master was knocked unconscious by the woman, tied, and gagged. Several men entered the kitchen and
one of them grabbed the boy before carrying him into the basement.

Waiting it was, then.

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“But she started to view a potential business as a playfield and got lost in her foolish ambitions. Pathetic.” Contempt in the voice of his Master was so biting that Sebastian almost purred with pleasure. His coldness was always alluring, but when it was aimed at someone other than him? It was positively irresistible.

From his spot on the roof, Sebastian couldn’t see anything, but he heard every word, and each of them brought a tiny stab of admiration with it.

His Master hadn’t called for him even when he regained his consciousness and removed his gag. He assessed the situation quickly and began to interrogate other prisoners, cool and calm, as if he wasn’t in danger — or in pain, for that matter. Even from here, Sebastian could sense the blood from the cut on the boy’s head, with its strong, intoxicating flavour. He would have gladly used the opportunity to taste it when the boy was unconscious if he hadn’t had company. As it was, all Sebastian could do was breathe it in, imagining its taste.

He startled out of his fantasies only when the boy and others were joined by the murderer herself. When the boy finally tried to call for him, Sebastian pretended that he hadn’t heard. No direct order was given and despite the admiration that was still burning in his veins, he was equally irked at the boy’s stubbornness and his refusal to ask him to accompany him in the first place.

Ciel Phantomhive was smarter than Sebastian had believed initially, he was willing to admit it, but physically, he was more helpless than a kitten Sebastian had taken to feeding every morning.

Maybe he would be less reckless in the future.

However, when the boy, chained to the prisoners of a social standing so low, they should have never even spoken to him, never mind received the right to die by his side, was thrown into Thames, the first stirrings of anger broke Sebastian’s sadistic resolve.

This soul belonged to him. No one but him was allowed to treat it carelessly.

Sebastian left the roof and flung himself into the river, feeling how his human shape started melting into demonic one. His Master was on the brink of passing out again when Sebastian tore him from the chains and carried him to the surface, grimacing at how damaged his lungs already felt.

He was right. They boy’s body was laughably weak, failing at the slightest strain.

“Sebastian,” his Master choked, shivering so violently as if he’d been submerged into ice, not in the late spring water.

Sebastian fully expected to be ordered to save the thieves — he could sense the boy’s conflict, his regret and compassion towards those pathetic worms. When his Master demanded that he secure
the evidence instead, Sebastian couldn’t fight off a grin.

How promising his little soul was. While the notion of compassion was ludicrous, it felt like a pleasing part of the boy, creating a delicious contrast between his uncertain darkness and prominent goodness. Even Sebastian found it difficult to predict which of these parts would prevail eventually but it would be interesting to toy with both of them, influencing them until the boy became the most perfect version of what he could be.

But first, he had to fulfil his duties.

Sebastian stepped towards the killers who seemed to have frozen at the sight of him and let his lips stretch into an even wider smile. The humanity bled out of him entirely, replaced by impenetrable darkness and longing for destruction, and he succumbed to them readily, thrumming with vicious energy and life.

He knocked out the woman, the leader of this dubious gang, first, hitting her in the same exact spot his Master had been hit. When she collapsed, he focused on the men, his main prey — the prey he was allowed to kill, hissing in delight when two of them tried to flee.

The screams were music to his ears. The blood he absorbed was an essence that sated his hunger for a while, but when the last of the men fell and Sebastian turned back to his Master, this hunger flared anew.

The boy smelled intoxicating. Half-dead and exhausted, he looked fragile and defenceless, and Sebastian reached for him before he could stop himself, his claws lengthening further. The small wound on the boy’s head was still bleeding and the scent of it was stronger than that of the bodies of the murdered men combined.

The hunger overcame him. Sebastian growled, inhaling the maddening scent greedily, and clenched the boy’s coat, ready to jerk him closer and suck the soul right out of him, contract and rules be damned. However, as he leaned closer, something drew his attention, dispersing the ravenous fog in his mind.

His feather was clenched in the boy’s hand, so tightly, as if it was his most precious possession. Sebastian stilled, staring at him, and slowly, the shards of darkness began to leave his body, replaced with deeper, unfamiliar sensations.

He wasn’t sure what to think of it. Had his Master grabbed it by accident, as his consciousness was fading? But the way he was holding it… no, he must have picked it up deliberately. Why? Whatever attachment he’d started to feel for Sebastian, it was shattered to nothing after the incident at the palace.

Two weeks ago, when Sebastian still believed in his own wrong assumptions about the boy, this sight would have only sickened him. Now… now he wasn’t sure what he was feeling.

Hesitating, Sebastian shook his head to clear it from the remains of the hunger. Another first for him — he’d never lost control like this. He’d never been genuinely overcome by thirst for his Masters before, not to this point.

Carefully, gently, Sebastian lifted the boy into his arms, watching his face rapturously.

He would complete the task assigned to him later. Right now, he had to deliver his Master to safety.
The boy developed a fever. Thankfully, Tanaka, a strange and usually silent old man, had returned from the hospital recently, so he supplied Sebastian with everything he needed to help his Master combat his illness.

Upon careful consideration, Sebastian decided not to remove the feather from the boy’s hand. He was curious what he would do as he woke up. However, when the boy did awaken and stubbornly kept the feather close, even glaring at Sebastian like he was going to take it away, his initial astonishment and incomprehension returned with doubled force.

What could the boy want with his feather? It didn’t hold any power. Was it truly a sign of attachment? But it didn’t make sense, not after everything that transpired and especially not when Sebastian himself was guarding his bed, ready to execute every order given to him.

“Go away,” the boy demanded, still delirious from fever, clutching the feather even tighter.

He had to go away? Had he been replaced by his own feather?

Deeply confused, Sebastian bowed his head and left the room, only to return five seconds later. The boy was already sleeping, hugging the feather to his chest.

A vague sense of displeasure hissed somewhere at the back of his mind. Sebastian frowned, trying to shake it off, but the hissing got louder, growing into a growl of annoyance the source of which he couldn’t understand.

Well, if the boy preferred a feather to his company, Sebastian didn’t mind. He had other matters that required his attention.

His annoyance lasted longer than he himself had expected. When the time to check on the boy came, Sebastian asked Tanaka to do that, and a minute later, his Master’s piercing screams tore through the silence.

“Sebastian! Sebastian!”

Surprise quickly morphed into glee. Sebastian stepped into the room and took a moment to drink in the view of the boy thrashing in his bed, his face twisted in delectable agony, before reaching for him and touching his forehead gently. Instantly, the tension left his Master and he relaxed, leaning into his touch.

A shadow of sadness flickered across Tanaka’s face, but he only bowed to Sebastian, acknowledging his superiority in the rights they had on the boy. Sebastian nodded at him in response, barely hiding his satisfied grin, and then focused on his Master.

As soon as the door closed, he abandoned the attempt to hold onto his human appearance. Inhaling the mixed, fevered emotions coming from the boy, Sebastian leaned over him, knowing he was awake but too dazed to remember it later.
He wasn’t certain what he intended. Perhaps to frighten the child further, to show him whose presence he had just chosen over that of a genuinely caring servant, whose feather he was holding in his hands as if it was some protective charm.

The boy saw it all — the silhouette of his true form, the red-eyed glare, the snarl, but impossibly, he only smiled in relief, like he found this sight comforting instead of disturbing.

Sebastian felt how his eyes widened in disbelief, and widened further when the boy fell asleep, still smiling peacefully. The only feeling he could sense from him now was tranquillity, tranquillity that shouldn’t have existed at all in these circumstances.

Entranced, Sebastian knelt before the bed and removed his gloves, tracing his black claw along the slim throat slick with sweat. He could feel the faint tremor of the pulse there, the testimony of life hidden in this small body, and it was difficult not to think of how easy it would be to end it. A little pressure, and his nail would break the thin layer of skin, causing the boy’s body to bleed out and making him choke to death. Or he could move his nail up, stopping at the eye where his seal was placed, and drive it through the translucent eyelid, digging into the boy’s brain, where all those unfathomable thoughts were stored.

With difficulty, Sebastian forced himself to remove his hand, though his eyes stayed glued to his Master’s face.

He wanted to crawl into this boy and devour him from inside, until everything that made him who he was belonged to Sebastian. He wanted to learn every thought of his, understand everything that motivated him. Did he wish to avenge his parents or himself? Did he even understand what giving away his soul meant?

With a sigh, Sebastian regained his human shape and reluctantly stepped away from the bed.

His Master was likely to want a dessert when he woke up.

It was time to test a new recipe.

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In the months that followed, his Master had become quite skilled at solving crimes with minimal assistance. However, his tendency to get into troubles wasn’t diminishing at all, and while it undeniably made Sebastian’s life interesting, it was also extremely bothersome. The boy managed to endanger himself even when he was simply standing on the street, which spoke of his appalling inattentiveness and which meant that Sebastian often had to try to be in several places at once.

They had just eliminated a murderer who was obsessed with blonde-haired women and Sebastian was destroying all evidence of the body’s existence when his seal began to twitch. Tensing, he crushed the remaining leg to dust and dashed outside, where his Master was located.

The problem became immediately apparent. The boy was standing at the streetlamp, gazing somewhere vacantly, while a huge, badly dressed man was creeping in his direction with an
arrogant, predatory smirk on his face.

Sebastian watched this picture, considering his options. Based on the smell he could detect from this stinking creature, he was interested in things that would inevitably send his Master into a deep pit of nightmares. At the same time, the boy was annoyingly reckless with his own safety and deserved to be taught a lesson. Even if he called him on time, Sebastian could still wait for about twenty seconds. It would be enough to terrify his Master, to tear into the already raw wound left by his past and make it bleed profusely. Maybe next time, he would be more alert to his surroundings.

There was also the fact that being caught by this man would make his Master scream for him, and what a beautiful sound that was. It was the only time when Sebastian enjoyed hearing his hateful name.

The boy let out a sigh and hugged himself in a clear attempt to get warm, and the man slowed, preparing for an attack. One of his hands reached for a button on his pants, pulling it loose, and just like that, Sebastian’s amusement vanished.

He reached the man before he could make the final step towards the boy, snapping his neck and whisking him away. Throwing the body on the ground, Sebastian stared at it for a while, trying to understand why he’d done it.

In the end, he had to admit that he wasn’t sure. One moment, he was gleefully anticipating the splash of suffering and horror in his Master, and the next, the thought of this dirty creature laying hands on him became intolerable.

Sebastian couldn’t recall the last time he had to question himself so often. The boy steadily continued to bring out the strangest impulses in him.

The air around him darkened suddenly, whispering a warning, and Sebastian snapped his head up.

No sounds could be heard, only the silence of the night. But something was lingering here, something that only demonic intuition could sense.

He was being watched.

Sebastian waited, wondering if whomever was watching him would reveal themselves, but as nothing happened, he shrugged.

He wasn’t worried in the slightest. All mysteries had a tendency to unravel sooner or later.

This time, when he returned to the boy, he let his presence be seen.

“T’m done, Master,” he announced, and was treated to a beautiful scowl.

“Too long,” the boy muttered and held his hands up. Sebastian smiled at him, picking him up obediently and shielding him from the wind.

“Where to now?” he wondered.

“Why do you always ask such stupid questions?” His Master’s voice was sharp but at the same time, he wrapped his hands around Sebastian’s neck, leaning his head against his shoulder and snuggling closer. “Home,” he added sleepily.

‘Maybe that’s the secret,’ Sebastian thought. His Master was inattentive because of his constant sleepiness, which in turn was caused by his nightmares.
Sebastian had to try and find the way of dealing with them. He was one hell of a butler, after all.

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To his chagrin, he failed to find a solution. The boy’s nightmares persisted and all Sebastian could think of doing was come into his room to wake him, announcing that he was safe.

When the letter from Madam Red arrived, urging him to organise a celebration of the boy’s birthday, Sebastian decided that it could be a useful idea. The boy forbade him to even speak of this day, but surely it would help to distract him? Constant reliving of his past and the blood-filled cases he was being sent on by the Queen were hardly beneficial for his already traumatised mind, and while Sebastian appreciated how the anguish intensified the flavour of his Master’s soul, as a butler, he knew he had to attempt to create a balance of a sort.

He had to be perfect for his Master. It was the least he could do in exchange for such a unique, complex soul.

He’d begun his preparations early, devising a menu that would consist only of his Master’s favourite dishes. Then he sent out the invitation letters and planted a new set of white roses in the greenhouse, adding a self-made fertiliser that was supposed to speed up the process of growth considerably.

Sebastian was fairly confident of his plan until the day of the celebration. The moment he saw his Master’s grim, unhappy face, he realised he’d made a mistake. A bad one.

“Sebastian,” the boy sounded worryingly lifeless. “What have you done?”

“Madam Red has written me a letter, insisting that I organise a celebration event today,” he replied carefully. “After careful consideration, I decided that it is my responsibility as a butler to ensure that you enjoy your birthday…”

The boy listened calmly, measuring him with a cold, steady gaze. Growing increasingly uncomfortable, Sebastian tried to describe the menu he’d prepared, hoping that it would soften the boy’s mood, but before he could finish, a hoarse “shut up” interrupted him.

He fell silent, looking at his Master and feeling a strange, unpleasant knot in his chest. This knot acquired thorns as the boy tore into him verbally, with all viciousness Sebastian knew he possessed, throwing moronic, half-witted, and incompetent at him, almost shaking with fury.

“May I remind you that it is your aunt who suggested the idea of celebration?” Sebastian tried to speak calmly despite the pressure in his chest, but when the boy replied, “She doesn’t know me. You were supposed to,” the hellish knot suddenly increased in size, squashing his organs mercilessly.

‘I do know you,’ he thought darkly. ‘You’re mine.’

But the boy was right, wasn’t he? He’d overstepped the boundaries of a butler. More than that,
he’d betrayed the trust of his Master. Who but Sebastian knew how much the boy hated social gatherings? And now that he had elaborated on his position, Sebastian was annoyed with himself for having failed to consider it. How foolish was it to believe that the boy would enjoy to be reminded of this particular anniversary?

“Get everything ready for their arrival,” the boy ordered him bitterly. “I don’t want to see you until then.”

Another irritating pang of emotions he didn’t understand. Was that guilt, he wondered? He’d certainly never experienced something like this before. And if it was, why would he feel it? He might have made a mistake but he’d made plenty of them during the eleven months of his service, especially at first. Why did such reaction appear now?

Nodding wordlessly, Sebastian left the room and moved to the kitchen, but when he heard a loud bang and the boy’s painful gasp, he rushed back, hovering near the door.

No more sounds could be heard but his seal didn’t burn, meaning that his Master was fine. Still, Sebastian found himself unable to move away, listening to the silence and wondering what he could do to chase away the unpleasant feeling that only continued to grow in him.

With every passing minute of the celebratory dinner, Sebastian was getting acquainted with a sense of mortification. The louder Madam Red laughed, the more nonsensical stories about the Phantomhives Alexis Midford told, the more questions Lady Elisabeth fired and the more criticism Francis Midford unleashed, the darker his Master’s face became, until it looked like he was about to be violently sick. Even Sebastian considered this gathering ghastly, so for his Master, it had to feel twice as dreadful.

This was a brilliant way to torment the boy while pretending to have his best interests at heart and normally, Sebastian would have enjoyed knowing that his plan had worked so well. But the most infuriating thing was, he hadn’t planned this. He genuinely wanted to let his Master celebrate his birthday, and if there was something Sebastian hated, it was miscalculating.

Seeing the boy limp was surprisingly off-putting, another thing that was quite atypical of him. Usually, Sebastian enjoyed any display of pain he could derive from his Master, but this time, he found it distasteful. Distasteful to the point where he was consumed by the need to make him sit and examine his foot, but the celebration was still ongoing and he still had a role to play.

When everyone finally left, Sebastian attempted to persuade the boy to let him take a look, only to be swiftly dismissed.

Banished behind the door, he stared at its surface, curiously listening to the emotions that were surging through him and trying to identify them.

Ah. Rejection. He hadn’t thought it would have such a tangy flavour. He’d already faced rejection from the boy after their visit to the palace, back during the first months of their contract, and while
it felt vaguely unsettling, it was nothing in comparison to the fascinating mix of feelings and sensations that overflowed him now.

After thorough contemplation, Sebastian decided that he disliked feeling like this. His craving to be close to the boy when he was angry with him was fierce and unyielding, igniting hunger so maddening, it demanded that he barge into this room and grab the boy, crushing his forgiveness out of him by force.

Rubbing his chest in attempt to alleviate this urge, Sebastian left, reviewing the options he had.

Acting forcefully went against their contract, not to mention that it was such a crude way of achieving his goals that Sebastian had always despised it, another reason why many of his fellow demons, even those of an equal rank, scoffed at him. Furthermore, even if he did betray his own rules, the forceful approach would never work on his Master. He had to devise something more intricate, more cunning.

Doubling his attempts to be flawless seemed like a promising choice. His Master did appreciate perfection.

In the morning, Sebastian poured even more efforts into fulfilling his duties than he normally did. He brought the tea and the newspaper as soon as the boy began to stir in his bed, bowing respectfully and keeping his voice deferential even when he received no answer.

After the boy finished his tea, Sebastian readily bent on one knee, beginning their dressing ritual. He made sure that his touches were gentle, especially when he touched his Master’s hurt foot, brushing against the delicate calf lightly. Then he started slipping the dark blue buttons of his jacket into the buttonholes, slowly and just as gently, admiring how beautiful the garments he’d selected for today looked on the boy.

When he finished, though, he was treated to the same cold expression he’d seen yesterday. There was no even minimal softening of the boy’s features, and while a part of Sebastian felt dejected, another one rejoiced in the sudden flare of delight.

His Master was the most peculiar creature he had ever met.

“Leave,” the boy snapped, pinning him down with an annoyed look. “I don’t want to see you unless I call for you.”

“As you wish,” Sebastian agreed. “However, I need to know your choices for today’s breakfast. I have prepared three kinds of tarts that—”

“I don’t want any,” his Master interrupted him, and against his will, Sebastian’s eyebrows rose.

“You don’t want a dessert?” he asked incredulously and immediately earned a blue-eyed glare.

“Are you planning to make me repeat myself? Haven’t you annoyed me enough?”

There was nothing Sebastian could do other than bow and leave, strangely upset at having his cooking rejected as well.

Maybe tarts were a bad choice. Too simple for someone with such refined tastes as his Master.

He would have to prepare something spectacular for the afternoon.
To Sebastian’s dismay, the afternoon dessert was discarded just like the morning one. The one he’d made for the evening was similarly ignored, and furthermore, the boy didn’t even finish the supper.

Yet another rejection made Sebastian’s blood sing but at the same time, it made him unable to focus on anything else other than earning his Master’s forgiveness. By morning, he developed his own kind of tea, made of the white roses the boy loved so much. When he delivered and presented it, the boy stared at him as if he’d lost his mind, and Sebastian’s brows furrowed. Was something wrong again?

To his pleasure, his Master drank the tea entirely. Then he gave him a stifled nod of approval, and something flourished in Sebastian’s chest, sending warmth trickling through his veins.

Strange. He’d have never believed that pleasing someone — a human, no less, could feel so immensely satisfying.

However, his triumph was short-lived. His Master refused to even touch the almond dessert he’d prepared for lunch, wrinkling his nose as if it was the most revolting thing he had the misfortune of seeing.

Now even more determined to break through this wall of rejection, Sebastian spent half of the following night on devising several more unique recipes, critically assessing the texture, the flavour, and the colour of what he’d made. He was done by morning, so when his lord woke up, he served him a cake in the form of a white rose, glazed with white chocolate he had specifically developed.

Shock and disbelief on the boy’s face tasted like victory. Mesmerised, Sebastian watched how his offering was accepted, admired, and devoured, and he couldn’t help but smile smugly at this sight.

The boy noticed.

His next desserts went steadily ignored.

“Question one,” the boy said. “Can you hurt me physically, despite being in a contract with me? Deliberately?”

His voice was calm and indifferent — only the underlying notes of tension belied its tranquillity. The fact that he was asking something like this after just being thrown off the horse, when
Sebastian was still holding him in his arms, spoke of boldness and decisiveness that many demons would envy.

“Yes,” Sebastian confessed, and when a sudden blooming scent of fear assaulted his nostrils, he barely fought the impulse to tighten his grip around the boy, tighten it until he heard these delicate bones snap.

The boy’s fear was intoxicating. Just imagining how thick with it his blood would feel made Sebastian shudder, and with a corner of his eye, he saw the beginnings of his wings materialising from the darkness, twitching in their urge to wrap themselves around the boy to hold him while Sebastian would tear his body to pieces with his claws.

Then the memory of the boy’s laughter burst into his head, the laughter he had worked so hard on earning, and the impulse passed.

He hadn’t made a fool of himself by running alongside his Master’s horse for nothing.

“Contract or not, I could hurt you,” Sebastian said, watching the boy’s face for reaction intently. “I could even kill you. However, I will not, because it would mean that I wouldn’t be able to touch your soul.”

It wasn’t the complete truth, but it was the truth he was going to adhere to.

He would not hurt this boy.

Not until the end.

Chapter End Notes

The second half will be posted a bit later - maybe around Saturday :)


Thank you all so much for your reviews and kudos, I'm so excited and happy that you enjoyed Sebastian's chapter!

The same warnings (creepiness, violence) apply to this second and last part of his POV. It covers the rest of the events plus the events of E1 of the anime. Hope you'll also enjoy it!

The descending twilight sent the majority of the passers-by hurrying to cafes, carriages, or their houses, leaving the streets half-deserted. The winter coldness was increasing steadily, growing sharp and unpleasant, but his Master was stubbornly waiting behind one of the street corners, peeking around it occasionally.

“I could simply steal those coins from him without him even noticing,” Sebastian offered mildly, and his little lord sniffed and then frowned at him.

“No need,” he said brusquely. “I’m going to do that myself.”

“The Earl of Phantomhive is going to steal from someone?” Sebastian gasped in fake outrage and was rewarded with a slight twitching of the boy’s lips.

“Having my butler steal for me would be equally unacceptable,” he noted. Despite the warm coat, he was clearly cold. The tip of his nose had turned bright-red almost an hour ago but it looked like none of Sebastian’s arguments would work here, not when they were investigating yet another case on the Queen’s behalf.

“No,” the boy continued, “he’s going to give me some of those coins himself. Then, we will order an expertise, and if they are indeed fake, like the Queen believes, we will let the Scotland Yard know. We’re bound to get acquainted with them at some point, anyway.”

“How are you planning to make Lord Jameson share his coins with you?” Sebastian arched his eyebrow, genuinely curious. His Master had an intricate mind, but to force a Lord suspected of forgery to give away some of the allegedly forged coins? It didn’t seem possible even for him.

A mysterious, cunning smile graced his Master’s lips — such a rare and beautiful sight.

“Even if he is the forger we need, he is not completely despicable,” the boy stated. “He participates in charity and from what we’ve learned, he’s compassionate.”

Sebastian considered these words but they still didn’t make much sense to him.

“So what?” he wondered. “Are you planning to pretend that you are raising money for someone? Or that participating in his own capture is a form of charity?”

Snorting, the boy shook his head.

“You are hopeless at times,” he uttered wryly, shivering when a particularly strong surge of wind
assaulted him. “Honestly, for a demon…” Suddenly, his demeanour changed, and the excited light entered his eye. “Here he is!”

Sebastian took a careful look, locating their target effortlessly.

“Well, I don’t know about you,” he started but his Master interrupted him.

“Well, I must say…”

“Not enough to break my neck, but enough for it to leave traces. Slap me, right now!”

Sebastian stood thunderstruck, staring at his Master in frozen shock.

Hit him?

He had imagined killing this boy in thousands ways, thousands times. He imagined breaking his bones, tearing him to tiny, bloody shreds, even devouring him alive, drinking in his screams and sobs. But those were fantasies only, and if they grew into actual impulses, Sebastian always managed to suppress them — for now, at least.

Hitting him, though, using such a human way of inflicting violence? It was disturbingly real and it didn’t sit well with him. Not at all.

“Don’t just stand there!” his Master hissed furiously. “Be quick!”

Still, Sebastian hesitated, and the boy growled before pressing his fingers to his marked eye.

“Hit me, Sebastian. This is an order.”

This so-called order was composed in the most abysmal way, leaving Sebastian with numerous openings he could use against this foolish creature. But the boy kept glaring, waiting, and Sebastian raised his arm and slapped him, even though everything in him protested against it.

This was not his idea of violence. When the time that would allow him to hurt his lord came, he would do it differently. Very differently.

The boy let out a surprised noise as he staggered under the impact of the blow, and then blood began to seep from between his lips. Sebastian stared, flabbergasted, refusing to believe his eyes. When his Master spat a small white tooth into his hand, looking equally stunned, Sebastian’s eyes widened and something toxic and bitter swirled in his stomach.

He thought he had hit the boy with moderate strength. His blow wasn’t supposed to make him bleed, and it was most definitely not strong enough to knock out his tooth. How could he have misjudged his strength so badly?

The boy was the first to broach the awkward silence.

“Well,” he said, “it’s even better this way. It will be more realistic.”

Before Sebastian could say anything, his lord threw the tooth on the ground, smeared the blood across his mouth, shook off his hat and stumbled towards Lord Jameson.

Sebastian watched how he disappeared behind the corner. Then he bent down, picked up the
discarded tooth and looked at it as the toxic knot within him tightened.

He disliked feeling like this. He disliked hurting his Master when it wasn’t his intention.

What was the reckless child even thinking, ordering something like that? Any other demon would have used this opportunity to pummel him to death, interpreting his words as the permission to kill him, taking his soul and leaving his drained, bloodied body on the ground.

Why hadn’t he?

The thought flashed through his mind, but thinking about it required analysis that Sebastian wasn’t willing to undertake right now.

Instead, he hid the tooth in his pocket and tuned in to hear his Master, trying to understand his plan.

“Attacked?” Lord Jameson was saying, sounding troubled. “Poor child! Were you travelling alone?”

“Y—yes,” his Master’s voice trembled so realistically, Sebastian grimaced in distaste. “I was supposed to get home but… they took all my money. I cannot even afford a carriage! I apologise, I know it’s bad manners, but could you help me, please? I just need to get home. I promise I will return everything to you the moment I arrive to my manor.”

“Of course,” the man assured him, and Sebastian could hear how he began to count the coins.

He couldn’t help but marvel at the boy for his bold ideas, and yet… and yet this mediocre case wasn’t worth his tooth. Why was his lord so obsessed with solving each case assigned to him to such degree of perfection? This was what Sebastian found most troubling. Was he truly so loyal to the Queen that even his own safety paled in comparison?

The Queen. A fascinating human, truly, whose viciousness and greed had achieved more than most demons could ever aspire to.

Sebastian had his own suspicions about her and her possible involvement in the tragedy of Phantomhives. Numerous hired men and women that attempted to break into the manor and attack his Master even before the news about his return reached the underworld, their sheer number and the persistence of their attacks could mean only one thing — the Queen or her representatives were sending them. They were the only ones with enough power to keep hiring this many assassins for one, allegedly defenceless child when only a selected few knew about his survival. Moreover, as soon as the attacks stopped, the letter with invitation to the palace arrived.

The tasks assigned to his Master were also dubious at best. Without Sebastian’s assistance, the boy would have been dead in the first days of his work. A woman like the Queen could hardly be that oblivious and guileless.

However, the boy would never listen to him without evidence, and Sebastian himself wasn’t invested enough to start his own investigation, especially since the Queen, even if he was right, had the murders executed by someone else. As his Master liked to say, he was a pawn, nothing more, so he would let his lord make his own moves.

Moreover, what a pleasure it would be to bathe in the boy’s turmoil and pain if the Queen was indeed the mastermind behind the deaths of his parents and his torture. Someone he was trying to serve so devotedly, someone who he deeply respected, turning out to be his biggest enemy. The shock and denial that would fill his eyes, the way his lips would tremble, genuinely this time, from the betrayed, uncontrollable tears... His soul would undoubtedly darken to the most impenetrable
shade of grim grey, and after killing the Queen as per their contract, Sebastian would gladly tear it right from the boy’s chest, deliberately piercing his heart with his claws and holding it until its last, dying twitch.

A warning bell rang in his ears suddenly, putting a stop to his dreams and making him straighten and look around.

Someone was watching him. Again. Had probably been watching him from the moment he and his Master arrived here.

Smiling slightly, Sebastian glanced back at the boy, who was approaching him with a self-satisfied smirk on his bloodied mouth.

He had an idea of who their observer could be.

He just wasn’t sure what he wanted.

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The boy was so consumed by his satisfaction at having completed another case that he never raised the question of his broken tooth. He still seemed upset about Sebastian organising a birthday party for him but he didn’t care about being hit like that.

Sebastian didn’t understand him. The way his Master was acting was absolutely inconceivable. He could punish him for the wrong flavour of tea but he ignored the instance of Sebastian overestimating his strength and harming him?

His confusion left him strangely unsettled, and this unsettledness amplified when he and the boy were having a Latin lesson. Upon checking his answers, Sebastian immediately noticed a small mistake in translation... and paused.

A few days ago, he would have gladly punished the boy. Now, he wavered.

He’d experienced the same unexplainable hesitation back when he realised that his overuse of strikes had made his Master’s hands flushed and trembling. He’d chosen against hitting him then and he felt equally reluctant to do that now. The emotions he experienced after slapping the boy were still fresh in his memory and for whatever reason, he wasn’t willing to relive them.

Sebastian glanced at the pointer, then at the boy. Then at the mistake he’d made.

Well. It was rather minor. It didn’t really warrant punishment. The boy had made a remarkable progress over the last months and Sebastian rarely had to correct him.

Perhaps it was time to choose another form of punishment. Physical one had stopped being satisfying.

“Oh, Everything is correct,” Sebastian lied, carefully putting the sheet of paper aside. His Master beamed at him and he found the sight quite sore.
He would make today’s dessert out of the darkest and bitterest chocolate, Sebastian decided. And he would refuse to remake it.

In these circumstances, it was a sufficient punishment.

***

The process of finding more servants for the manor was deeply entertaining. Discussions and debates with his Master, the search process, consultations with Lau and stalking of the potential candidates were more engaging that any task Sebastian had ever been assigned. He was proud as he finally managed to locate those who his Master approved of, but this feeling began to wane as soon as he took them to the manor.

Mey-Rin was a bland, annoying fool who couldn’t make a step without tripping, but overall, she was harmless. Finnian, on the other hand…

Sebastian liked the idea of hiring someone with Finnian’s backstory, but when he actually saw this strange boy in the company of his Master, his satisfaction shattered.

What had he been thinking? Finnian was clearly dangerous. One wrong touch, and the body of his Master would be crushed.

Not that the idea seemed unappealing, but it was one thing to harm the boy himself and another thing entirely to let him be harmed by others. Particularly as Sebastian treated his butler duties with utmost seriousness and allowed the thoughts of harming his Master remain just that, thoughts, or plans for the distant future, when their contract would come to an end.

“Good,” his lord approved, smiling in a way that Sebastian couldn’t define as either genuine or fake. “Now add another one.”

“Young Master!”

“Quiet!” the boy glared at him, silencing him effectively, before focusing on Finnian as he was attempting to hold his hand.

No, Sebastian didn’t understand him at all.

The boy hated being touched, even casually. Even by his relatives. He had disliked Sebastian’s touches as well at first, and only months later, he seemed to grow used to them.

Sebastian revelled in the knowledge that he was the only one who the boy willingly let close to him, but when he was doing things like this? Granted, his Master was evidently engaged in another manipulation of his, wanting to earn Finnian’s loyalty, but as a butler, Sebastian couldn’t approve of his chosen tactic.

When the boy’s hand was forcefully pushed to the very floor and he gasped, Sebastian decided that watching passively wasn’t an option. He snatched his Master from his spot and pressed him close,
jumping away from Finnian.

As he’d expected, his efforts weren’t rewarded. Instead, his Master kicked him right in the shin before hissing, “Let me go!”

“But—”

“Let me go this instant, it’s an order!”

Reluctantly, Sebastian complied, and was forced to spend the next hour as a witness to his Master’s utter recklessness. Finnian possessed power that could break the boy’s arm in a way that no one, not even Sebastian would be able to fix properly, leaving him a cripple. He had to understand it yet he was still risking.

His stubbornness knew no boundaries and while it was fascinating at times, it was also extremely bothersome.

When this appalling initiation ceremony finally came to an end, Finnian moved to his Master and pressed his head against his shoulder, and Sebastian sneered. It would work better if Finnian wasn’t towering over the boy. As it was, he looked ridiculous.

“Thank you,” Finnian whispered, and Young Master raised his hands, patting him on the back carefully.

The gesture drew Sebastian in and he stared attentively, memorizing each movement.

He’d never seen anyone being comforted before, not like this. If he had, then he must have considered it irrelevant and removed it from his memory.

His Master was notably hesitant in applying his caresses but Finnian seemed to enjoy it — his body relaxed and he began to emanate a repellent brand of happiness. Perhaps this was what Sebastian himself could use on the boy during his nightmares?

Intrigued by the idea, Sebastian replayed the scene he had just witnessed to make sure he remembered every crucial bit.

He was looking forward to testing it.

***

The case of murdered children who had been violated before their deaths was a gift that Sebastian hadn’t expected this soon. His lord remained strong and reserved, like always, but Sebastian could sense his real emotions, could see the anxious flashes of darkness in his soul. The case was affecting his Master. If not for the trick Sebastian had learned back at the beginning of their cooperation, that every light touch helped to ground the boy, their first meeting with the Scotland Yard would have ended in embarrassment.

His lord endured everything stoically, but when the night came, the things he had to be thinking of
during the daylight came to the surface.

Sebastian had to admit that he had lost the sense of time, too busy with liquidating the results of their so-called servants’ activities, so when the boy’s screams reached him, they almost took him aback.

His Master’d had many nightmares over the time Sebastian knew him, but he had never called his name before — not like this. The terror and despair in his voice were so piercing that for a moment, as he was moving towards his bedroom, Sebastian thought that something might be wrong. Could anyone have gotten into the house?

When he flew in, though, all tension left his body. There was no one in the room with the boy. He was perfectly safe. However, he kept jerking in his bed violently, screaming Sebastian’s name with increasing despondency, and it was unusual enough for Sebastian to rush to his side.

He had never seen a nightmare so strong. The fact that the boy was calling for him was undeniably pleasing but Sebastian couldn’t enjoy it sufficiently, at least not yet.

“My lord,” he called, stopping and then kneeling next to the bed. “I’m here.”

To his consternation, the boy didn’t appear to hear him. His face twisted in an anguished grimace and he only choked out again, “Sebastian!”

“I’m here,” he repeated, at a loss now. What was he supposed to do to break his Master from the nightmare?

Fortunately, at this very moment, the boy moaned and opened his eyes, blinking in disorientation. And then he did the most unexpected thing.

Before Sebastian could open his mouth to say anything, his Master threw himself on him, wrapping his arms around his neck and hiding his face in his shoulder, breathing harshly. It was so highly out of character for him that Sebastian froze, his mind blanking out, unsure of how to react.

“Kill them,” the boy muttered. “Kill them, Sebastian. Kill them all.”

“I already did, Master,” he replied uncertainty.

“Good.” The boy breathed in deeply, shifting closer, as if trying to meld with him. “If they return, you will kill them again, yes?”

“Of course. I will do anything to protect you. Until the very end.”

Another sigh. Another attempt to melt against him.

The feeling that overcame Sebastian this time was fragile and hopelessly unfamiliar. The boy’s arms felt overheated around his neck, his body shuddering but continuing to seek comfort from him, and something gentle, hesitant, and possessive came to life within his chest, making his eyes flare brightly.

Only now did he remember about his vague plan. Carefully, still bewildered by his reaction, Sebastian mirrored the touches he’d memorised, stroking the boy’s back lightly. For a moment, he got no reaction, but then his Master began to relax. With a trembling sigh, he pressed even closer, so close that Sebastian could physically sense the wild heartbeat pounding against his ribcage, and a new surge of the same strange feeling washed over him, this time reaching even those parts of his body that had remained immune to it before.
Then, just as suddenly, the tension returned to the boy, breaking the peculiar stillness around them.

“Don’t touch me,” he hissed, pushing Sebastian away so vehemently, as if his touch burned him.

Confusion and something else, something dark and acidic, slammed into him, and his heart constricted in a way Sebastian had never had to endure before.

Was his human body failing in some way?

There were no other alarming signs, though, so he ignored the unpleasant sensation and gazed at the boy coldly.

He tolerated his accusations, knowing that they were valid yet unable to accept it and mean it. Since he failed to find an explanation for his strange reaction, his puzzlement turned into more familiar hostility, and when he looked at the boy again, he wanted nothing but to crush him.

The ridiculous child terrified himself over the shadows of the past that could never hurt him again, waking the entire house with his pathetic screams, and then tried to tell him that he was an embarrassment? How human of him, trying to shift the blame onto someone else.

The night had passed, but the hissing animosity in him hadn’t. When his Master recoiled from the tablecloth stained with the spilled wine during his breakfast, staring at it as if it was his nightmare come to life, Sebastian twisted his lips in a sneer.

“Come, now, Young Master,” he drawled. “It is merely wine. Surely you don’t expect it to pose any danger to you?”

The boy stared at him wide-eyed, with a hurt expression, and Sebastian felt how his lips parted further in a half-satisfied, half-mocking smile. The urge to humiliate the child more, to watch him break filled him with vivid, predatory interest, but before he could press, Baldroy snapped, “Hey, don’t talk to him like that!”

Taken aback, Sebastian stared at him, wondering how the only servant he was personally interested in, the one who his Master hadn’t even wanted to hire, could come to his defence so rapidly.

As a demon, he was annoyed, his already dark mood souring even further. As a butler, though, he thought he should be pleased. After all, the point of hiring those morons was to protect the Young Master, so it was good to know that they already treated their responsibilities seriously.

Still, irrational anger continued to burn in his veins, demanding to be let out, and when the boy told him about his plan, Sebastian smiled slowly.

He already had an idea.

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Frederick Lyndon was a slimy and nausea-inducing human being that didn’t deserve to breathe the same air as his Master, and Sebastian would enjoy tearing him apart, but first things first.

His Master was holding on admirably, Sebastian couldn’t deny it. However, he was confident that this resolve was going to snap very soon, and he anticipated being the one to push the last pillar from beneath it. For all his attempts to solve the case himself, for all his creativity in devising a special approach to the task, the boy was still haunted by his shadows too intensely to withstand the test Sebastian had prepared.

He would fail. He was already failing, glancing around uncertainly and forgetting the role he’d willingly assumed, and watching him fall to pieces in the daylight, not during the nightmares where Sebastian couldn’t follow him, was captivating.

He only hoped that it would be worth it. He was displaying an ultimate restraint in letting Lyndon ogle his Master — even the darkest, mostly dormant part of him, which urged him to kill the boy on more than once occasion regardless of the contract, disliked it.

“As your servants are away, I could leave him with you for several days,” Sebastian suggested, absorbing the splash of shock and horror he could sense within his Master. “Maybe a change of places will make him more organised.”

His gaze didn’t leave the boy’s face even for a minute, waiting for the moment he was craving. It was close, he could feel it — a dark, ugly spot was rapidly blooming in his Master’s soul, and his breathing was becoming irregular.

Give me an order to back away. Admit your defeat. Give up.

Nonetheless, the boy remained silent. His body was shaking slightly, his heart beating deafeningly, but he refused to say a word.

He couldn’t be seriously considering playing along?

“I’ll be going,” Sebastian uttered slowly, and the boy glared silently but said nothing.

That hateful feeling of unsettledness returned, breathing fuel into his smouldering annoyance. Sebastian waited, refusing to move until he had the boy’s answer, but when it arrived, he suddenly wished he hadn’t heard it, after all.

“I will do my best to please you, Count Lyndon.” His Master glanced at him coldly, his voice challenging, and Sebastian almost made a step back, stunned. “You were leaving, weren’t you? Master?”

He couldn’t mean it. Would he actually agree to stay with this man alone, for an unidentifiable amount of time? The boy who had panicked when he saw the spilled wine today, who woke up screaming and flung his arms around Sebastian’s neck so pathetically, in a desperate attempt to find comfort?

Comfort that he clearly hadn’t found, but it was another matter entirely.

To Sebastian’s turmoil, his Master looked more and more confident by the moment. His eye was full of darkness and spite that Sebastian was helplessly drawn to, but there was also deadly determination there — determination he couldn’t fight.

So he left, hoping that the boy would change his mind but not expecting it any longer.
The moment the door behind him closed, Sebastian jumped onto the roof and stretched against its surface, listening to the sounds within the house intently.

What a confounding and unpredictable creature his lord was. If Sebastian had suspected that his plan would fail, he would have hardly attempted to implement it. The idea of leaving the boy alone with Lyndon turned his stomach, filing his mouth with a thick bitter taste that was downright unpalatable, and Sebastian swallowed, trying to get rid of it.

He could hear the short conversation his Master had with the murderer before he was left alone. A quiet, jerky sound of footsteps — the boy must have stumbled towards a bed or an armchair. A sigh, then another one, louder and wetter.

He was obviously fighting to control himself. So much strength and dignity in such a small human being... what a perfect, flawless soul.

Sebastian closed his eyes, focusing on the scent of the boy's emotions. His fingers curled around the Phantomhive rings that were still in his possession and he squeezed them, briefly envisioning their history and the string of owners who passed them to one another, until both rings started to belong to his Master. The last of the Phantohmives.

His distaste faded slowly, growing into powerful, obsessive curiosity.

Would his lord be able to pass the test completely? What would he do if Lyndon proceeded in his advances?

This was quite an intriguing game, he thought, to see whose resolve would waver first. Would the boy call for him or would Sebastian feel compelled to interfere before any order was given?

When he reopened his eyes, he knew they were burning bright red.

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“You wouldn’t mind if I sat next to you, would you?” Lyndon purred, and Sebastian had to struggle to stay put.

It seemed like he was going to lose this game, after all. This hideous day kept rewarding him with one revelation after another, and the new one disclosed the undeniable fact that his Master was more stubborn than Sebastian himself.

The idea that any human could surpass him in anything, be that cruelty or stubbornness, seemed absurd, but Sebastian wasn’t in the mood to lie to himself.

The enthralling boy would rather die than lose in any game, even the one he hadn’t started. And wasn’t it what pulled Sebastian in from the start? His fierce, grim determination, his vicious thirst for victory?

He would have gladly let the game go further, raising the stakes — the problem was, even the
thought of Lyndon touching the boy infuriated him.

The boy’s panic smelled sharp and pungent, but no words escaped his lips as Lyndon moved to take the place next to him. Sebastian couldn’t see what was happening, but he could hear how his Master’s heart started accelerating to a worrying degree, pounding harder and harder, and his patience snapped.

In a flash, Sebastian shifted within the house, grabbing Lyndon by his throat and flinging him across the room. Vaguely, he sensed that he had taken his true form partly, and he wondered when it happened. Back when he jumped into the house or when he saw Lyndon in the dangerous proximity to the boy?

The boy himself was still panting, his skin abnormally white and glistening faintly with sweat. Upon seeing Sebastian, he shuddered and relaxed, dragging his feet on the couch and curling into a small ball.

This was the display of weakness Sebastian had been craving, but strangely, it brought him neither pleasure nor triumph. His Master had proven himself entirely today, once again, intensifying Sebastian’s hunger for his soul twofold. Despite his nightmares, despite the memories that attempted to break his core, he kept overcoming them all. Sebastian could only imagine what a stunning man Ciel Phantomhive would have become one day if he hadn’t signed his death certificate, gifting him with a right to kill him.

Kneeling, Sebastian took the boy’s hand in his, briefly shutting his eyes in pleasure at the contact. His Master’s skin was cold and wet from terror, and Sebastian wanted to lick all traces of sweat off him, to feel his essence in his belly, an appetiser before the luxurious meal that was waiting for him in the future.

“Your rings, Master,” he murmured, gently putting them on the boy’s slim fingers, where they rightfully belonged.

His Master looked like he was about to pass out, but he still managed to question him coldly, burning him with his gaze, spitting fire and defiance even though he was barely holding on. When he finally said, “Break every bone in his body. Don’t leave even one whole,” Sebastian’s heart swelled with delight and admiration.

Rather enjoying this new sensation, he kissed the boy’s hand, inhaling its scent, before pulling away and promising, “Yes, my lord.”

Breaking bones of any creature was pleasing, but toying with a man like Lyndon was particularly satisfying. Sebastian was careful to snap the smallest bones first, smiling when Lyndon’s pleas and moans turned into unending, hysterical screams. When he moved to larger ones, he turned back to the coach to make sure that his Master was enjoying the show, and to his astonishment, he found the boy sleeping.

How could anyone possibly fall asleep to such racket? Wasn’t the boy haunted by the nightmares — how could he find the screaming of someone being tortured to death comforting enough to relax so entirely?

More than that, Sebastian could see a small smile on the boy’s lips. A smile that fascinated him more than anything else that happened today.

Lyndon jerked beneath his feet, trying to move away, and Sebastian stepped on him.
“Where do you think you are crawling, Count?” he asked lazily. “We are not finished yet.”

Lyndon wheezed, staring at him in blind horror, and Sebastian increased the pressure, breaking the collarbone.

Without his Master’s attention, toying with this insect quickly became rather bland.

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With Lyndon’s case closed, they all returned to the manor, but it seemed that the boy’s intensified nightmares had followed him. He screamed every night, but unless he called his name, Sebastian refused to come and wake him. He had already tried to offer comfort and was rejected, so until he devised a new plan, he wasn’t going to assist without an order.

Still, the longer the nightmares continued, the more tempting the idea to come up with a solution seemed. Sebastian found himself thinking about it during various points of the day, studying the supposedly helpful literature in his free time. To his annoyance, unless he was willing to drug the boy, there was no advice offered, which brought him back to where he was from the start.

A good butler couldn’t give up so easily, though. He didn’t deserve to be called a servant of the Phantomhives if he couldn’t help his Master sleep peacefully.

The back caress he had seen his Master administer when dealing with Finnie had worked to a point, albeit not entirely. However, since it was the most effective tool Sebastian knew of, he decided to focus on it.

He spent the next days watching the servants, wondering if their interactions with each other would turn out to be helpful. They were idiotic enough to get themselves into trouble every hour but they always remained cheerful, no matter how harshly Sebastian reprimanded them.

Soon, he decided to focus his efforts on Mey-Rin. Bard got sullen or angry, not upset, while Finnie broke down crying and ruined half of the manor in his hysterics, making everyone stay away from him. Mey-Rin was the only one who listened to Sebastian’s diminishing remarks and was moderately upset about them. Her attempts to please him were partly entwined with a scent of desire for him, which presented a perfect opportunity. A few more stress-filled weeks and she would break down, and since she didn’t cause destruction on the scale of Finnie, either he or Bard was bound to comfort her.

Satisfied with his choice, Sebastian doubled his efforts. He would give Mey-Rin an encouraging smile, watching how she blushed, and then he changed his attitude abruptly, stalking her around the house and criticising every move she made.

After a week, when the boy’s nightmares decreased sharply, Sebastian finally got what he wanted. After another harsh remark, Mey-Rin cried right in front of him and Bard, and in front of Young Master who hid himself under the table with a cookie, clearly hoping that Sebastian couldn’t sense him.
Foolish child. Sebastian would recognise his scent and his heartbeat even if there were miles separating them.

When Bard hastened to Mey-Rin and wrapped one of his hands around her shoulders, Sebastian stared at him attentively, watching every slide and stroke. It all took no longer than fifteen seconds and Mey-Rin seemed to calm down immediately, sending Bard a grateful smile.

That was it? Three main movements.

Sebastian replayed them in his mind several times, trying to determine what was particularly comforting in such a simple combination. He hadn’t found an answer but in the end, it didn’t matter.

He knew what to do.

Now he just had to assist his Master in getting a nightmare.

***

Creating an illusion with smoke was laughably easy. Sebastian blended in with one of the corners of the room, watching curiously how his Master tried to control his panic, backing away and breathing in and out slowly. Recalling how his other Masters reacted to illusions Sebastian had created for them, the yells and the begging, Sebastian felt his lips quirk in a smile.

Only his lord could demonstrate such stunning restraint in the face of a disaster. The only times when he lost control was in his dreams, and Sebastian fully intended to change that. He would not tolerate any weakness in someone he was serving, not again.

As he had planned, the nightmare came this very night. His Master didn’t scream, but his soft gasps and the violent pounding of his heart could be heard even on the other side of the house.

Grinning, Sebastian let his panic grow before finally entering the room.

The boy didn’t notice him even though he was no longer asleep. Breathing hard, he was sitting on the bed, his eyes closed, and Sebastian touched his back gently with one hand, pressing the other against his hair and sliding it down to his neck, squeezing it just like he’d seen Bard do.

The effect was instantaneous — all tension bled out of the boy’s body and he leaned into him, accepting his touches. Then he looked up, blue eyes wide and startled, and alarmingly, Sebastian’s heart skipped a bit.

What was it? Another physical process of humans he wasn’t aware of?

A shadow of uncertainty flickered in his Master’s eyes but he said nothing, not moving away, as his heart began to calm. Satisfied, Sebastian repeated his motions, feeling how they soothed the tremors that were still running through the boy’s body.

Humans were indeed easy to control, even such uncommon ones as his Master. A few strokes, and
the nightmares were forgotten.

A swell of smugness formed in Sebastian’s chest, making his smile widen.

He should have tried this technique months ago.

The boy was very still in his arms. Sebastian patted him again, a warm, lazy swirl of condescension filling him at his success, but the next second, a strange sound tore from his Master’s chest.

Frowning in puzzlement, Sebastian stared at his face, trying to categorise this sound, but the boy repeated it, and after a moment, an astonished realisation came.

His Master was giggling. Giggling like Lady Elisabeth, giggling like Madam Red and Mey-Rin on occasion.

Was this a side effect? But Mey-Rin hadn’t had a similar reaction. The sound of his Master’s giggling was considerably more compelling than that of others, but it was still highly out of character for him. This wasn’t normal.

The boy’s shoulders shook more visibly and then he began to laugh, falling on the bed and trying to mute the sounds by covering his mouth.

Sebastian didn’t have sufficient knowledge about all human peculiarities but he did know when he was being laughed at.

This wasn’t a side effect. The boy was laughing for a specific reason — laughing at him. As if Sebastian had done something that warranted such mirth and mockery.

An outrage hissed in him and Sebastian stiffened, narrowing his eyes warningly.

“I’m glad you’re feeling well again, Master,” he growled. The boy tried to look serious for a second and even opened his mouth to say something, but only more laughter tore from his lips, making him pull his feet towards his chest helplessly.

Thin threads of darkness began to separate from his body, attempting to reach the boy and strangle him, and Sebastian pushed them back with an effort.

“Is something wrong with you again?” he acquired, his voice brimming with tension. “Should I bring you anything?”

“No,” the boy gasped. “Just leave. I’m going to sleep now.”

Sebastian nodded stiffly and hastened to escape before his true form came to the surface entirely.

What an arrogant, spoilt child! Sebastian rarely let anyone’s opinion of him affect him, but his lord seemed to possess a unique ability to make him feel deficient. He rarely reacted in the ways Sebastian expected, confounding him at every turn. He had done everything exactly the way Baldroy had done it and the boy seemed to react positively at first. What changed afterwards?

Snarling, Sebastian let his nails lengthen into claws, plunging them into the couch and shredding it angrily.

He had never displeased his Masters before. He served all of them dutifully until the moment he didn’t. Yes, he twisted and even abused their orders; unless perfect obedience was initially stipulated, he turned their lives into hell, making some of them beg him to kill them. But when he
fulfilled his direct duties, his performance was flawless. No one had ever complained.

No one but his current Master.

Sebastian stared at the torn piece of furniture and his mood soured further. In a second, he replaced the coach with its perfect copy, and the sight soothed his anger a bit.

His Master was entirely uncommon, that much was true. And disregarding the reasons, Sebastian had made him laugh, which was an achievement by itself.

The boy had truly laughed only twice: when Sebastian had been running beside his horse, hoping to soften his miscalculation, and today. Even though this second time, he laughed at him, it still meant something. And while annoyance was still pulsing through him, colouring his vision in occasional splashes of red, Sebastian couldn’t help but admit that he liked the sound of his Master’s laughter, perhaps exactly due to its rarity. It was clear, piercing, and refreshing, and earning it was almost as difficult as finding a suitable solution for his nightmares.

Comforted by the thought, Sebastian headed towards the kitchen, bringing the boy’s laughter to memory over and over again.

If he’d managed to achieve this, then he was still a good butler. And once he determined how to address his lord’s nightmares without being laughed at, he would be a perfect one.

***

It appeared that his little lord wasn’t capable of living long without engaging in one of their games. Since they had no guests who required special treatment and no criminals to eliminate, he decided to devise an actual board game and fill it with his deadly traps.

Sebastian found the idea intriguing.

Having finished cutting the bits of old newspapers, he joined his Master in preparing the board, his mind rapidly sorting through multiple possibilities. The task turned out to be even more engaging than he’d believed, so in the end, it wasn’t surprising that he’d missed the boy’s curfew.

“Those pieces of paper you’ve cut,” his Master murmured sleepily. “I bet you’ve made at least one mistake in measurements.”

Sebastian sighed, glad that the boy’s state didn’t let him see his irritation. Why did this child have to be so insistent on finding a flaw within him?

“Why would you think that?” he asked.

“I don’t think that. I know. Check them yourself, right now. It’s an order.”

Well, who was he to refuse?

Immediately after leaving the bedroom, Sebastian returned to the living room, stopping at the pile
of small pieces of paper he’d been cutting for over an hour.

0.7 inches long and 0.4 inches wide. A simple task that required nothing but a perfect sense of measurement.

Pointing it out to his Master tomorrow would be overwhelmingly satisfying.

He focused on his work, carefully reassessing each of pieces. There were about forty of them left when his eyes fell on the next bit… and widened in disbelief.

0.7 inches long, like needed. And 0.5 inches wide.

No. That wasn’t possible.

Sebastian checked again, all the while knowing that it was senseless as his eyes couldn’t lie to him.

Why had they lied as he was cutting them, then? He’d completed more than a thousand of them perfectly, but he had somehow butchered one? And how could his Master know?

Deeply resentful, Sebastian rolled the flawed piece into a vengeful ball and threw it into the fire. Then he replaced it with a newly cut perfect one.

His Master didn’t need to be informed of everything.

***

Devising the end for the game was challenging in a way Sebastian hadn’t been prepared for. He lingered for almost half an hour, considering various scenarios, wondering if he should depict the ending he himself was imagining for his Master and himself, masking it as a part of the game half-heartedly. Would that be too bold? Would it anger his Master, make him seethe with rage, or would it terrify him, covering Sebastian in a blanket of that delicious, raw smell?

How many options. How many intriguing concepts.

Today, Sebastian preferred the three of them. The first one entailed piercing the boy’s stomach with his claw, thinly, so thinly and swiftly that he wouldn’t even understand what’s happening. The pain wouldn’t come right away — it would be a wave, unhurried but intense, making his Master’s movements sluggish and uncoordinated until he collapsed on the floor under its force. Bleeding internally, dying and staring at him with his wide blue eyes, horrified and suffering… and when his heart would be giving its last, chaotic thumps, Sebastian would finally approach, forcing him to his feet despite his pained gasps and extracting his trembling soul slowly.

He could also stay with the boy after their contract ended for a while, lulling him into a sense of false security. His Master would be relieved even if he tried to hide it, growing more hopeful every day, and Sebastian would still attend to every need of his with utmost attentiveness. He would also begin to put poison into his food every morning, watching carefully for the effects to become visible. Slowly, perhaps painfully so, the boy’s body would start failing him, and with his allergies,
these effects would be far more distinctive. He was smart, so he would understand what’s going on sooner or later, but even if he tried to escape, Sebastian would follow. The hope would die every day, replaced with despair and hopelessness, and Sebastian would remain by his side till the very end, absorbing his Master’s fading strength as he fought for every breath.

Poisons, especially of a demon kind, were vicious. He could have almost a whole year with the boy after their contract, watching him fade away, vomiting blood and turning into weakened, suffocating cripple whose relentless pride would be broken to nothing, who would beg Sebastian to kill him.

Poisons were good for other things, too. A special kind of it was Sebastian’s third option, and it fascinated him most. With its help, he would be able to affect the body of his Master from within. He would confine him to a small place and he would focus on his brain, destroying one cell after another, turning a bright, sharp mind into a ruin. This was something he had never done before, which made this option especially inspiring. Would the boy understand what was happening to him? What would his face reflect? How bitter would his soul become, what kind of spices would it be enhanced with?

“How much longer are you planning to stare at the board and do nothing?” his Master’s annoyed voice startled Sebastian out of his reverie. Bowing his head apologetically, he focused on the blank space again.

On second thought, he didn’t want to spoil the fun before the time came. No, he would draw something neutral, something promising. Like a carriage full of dead people, prepared to be whisked into hell.

That would be fitting because even after having his wish come to life, his lord was going to lose.

***

Going to Lord Randall’s residence at night was mildly entertaining. The man spluttered and raged, sending him scandalised glares, but Sebastian withstood all that with a smile, waiting until his Master’s letter was read. Then he left, smirking at Sir Commissioner’s incessant curses and trying to imagine what his Master could have written to warrant such reaction.

He realised that something was wrong the moment he stepped into the manor. Based on his heartbeat, Young Master was still awake, and there was someone else in the room with him. His seal didn’t burn, though, so Sebastian was more perplexed than concerned. A quick scanning of the house showed that Bard was missing from the servants’ wing of the house, so he had to be the one to keep the boy company.

What possessed him to do that? Sebastian certainly hadn’t left any orders of this kind. And if his Master needed something, couldn’t he have simply waited for his return?

Frowning, Sebastian moved to the room, listening attentively. Bard was blabbing about his military experience, describing the way he’d tricked his superior, as if it was something so relevant that it had to be shared with the boy when he was supposed to be sleeping.
Had his lord had a nightmare?

Raising his hand, Sebastian was prepared to knock when his Master’s laughter, quiet and genuine, broke through the room, freezing him on the spot.

For a moment, his ears filled with this rare sound, absorbing it greedily. Then the understanding that he hadn’t been the one to evoke it settled and redness flared behind his eyelids, sending his heart skittering.

Sebastian slammed the door open before he could comprehend the abruptness of his action, and his eyes immediately flickered towards Bard, who was sitting on his Master’s bed, so at ease, as if he belonged here.

His breathing turned unusually harsh and shallow, his hands curling into fists, and all these incomprehensible reactions were so alarming that Sebastian forcefully shut them all down, stilling his malfunctioning human body.

Bard jumped up belatedly in a laughable attempt to defend his Master, pausing and then saying something, and Sebastian stared at him, sensing how a white-hot shock of rage, possessive and volatile, surged through him.

“Bard,” he said finally, knowing that the hissing of the darkness touched his voice despite his attempt to speak calmly. “Leave. Now.”

Instead of following his order, the insipid human backed away, stepping closer to his Master, and Sebastian narrowed his eyes, feeling how despite his attempts at control, his body tensed, readying itself for one, deadly jump.

“Sure,” Bard stammered finally. He stepped away from the boy and a part of tension left Sebastian unexpectedly, even though the anger remained. “Have a good night, Master. Sebastian.”

Bard shivered as he passed him, throwing a quick, confused glance in his direction, but Sebastian didn’t look at him any longer. His world narrowed to the boy sitting on his bed, staring at him in astonished incredulity, as if he wasn’t sure what had gotten into him.

Sebastian wasn’t sure himself.

He began to approach, knowing that his control was still close to snapping, and the boy had the audacity to ask, “Is something wrong?”

“Not at all, my lord,” Sebastian replied, forcing his lips to stretch in a smile. His Master flinched, as if he found the sight scary, and rage spiralled up again, filling him with a vindictive impulse to grab the boy by the hair and throw him across the room, hard enough to break all those fragile-looking bones.

The boy’s laughter was his, be that the laughter he’d earned or the laughter denoting his mistake. The right to stay by his side when he had nightmares also belonged to him, and he wouldn’t tolerate anyone else interfering, not even the boy himself.

Smoothening the bed to remove all possible traces of Bard, Sebastian straightened, the smile still glued to his face. The knots of darkness were unfolding, sliding towards the boy, not strong enough to gain a shape that a human eye could recognise but lethal nonetheless, and Sebastian knew that if he didn’t leave the room right now, he would do something he would later regret.

“Another nightmare, Young Master?” he asked conversationally. Without waiting for an answer,
he added, “I’ll bring you some hot milk. You shouldn’t be awake at this hour.”

The boy’s lost, hesitant face made the lividness within him snarl, and Sebastian turned from him abruptly, walking towards the door.

Rage burned through him as he was preparing the milk. It growled and swirled as he returned to the room, watching his lord drink his offering.

He had followed Bard’s example back in London and he was laughed at. He had spent months on trying to find a solution. How could someone who didn’t know the boy at all succeed where he failed? Was he supposed to tell ridiculous jokes now?

A thin ray of warmth split the darkness in Sebastian’s mind only when his Master fell asleep, not saying a word about the fact that he remained by his side without being ordered to. Sebastian watched him, slowly regaining his sense of peace, and after three and a half hours, he smiled, much calmer.

‘I will kill you,’ he thought gently, his eyes not leaving his Master’s face. ‘I will be the last thing you’ll see.’

Hopefully, all confusing reactions would stop with the boy’s heart.

***

In the morning, both the boy and Sebastian pretended that nothing had happened. Bard was the only one who threw wary glances at him, and considering that neither Mey-Rin nor Finnie risked approaching him, Bard had obviously shared some of what he’d witnessed at night. All servants looked like Sebastian was going to start yelling at them any moment, and while amusing to a degree, it was mostly frustrating.

As if he ever needed to raise his voice to instil fear and inspire obedience.

“Mr. Damian?” his Master said thoughtfully, staring at the letter.

“Yes. He is the owner of a Poseidon Company — we have signed a short-term contract with him, enabling him to manufacture stuffed animals for Funtom Corporation.”

“I remember,” the boy set him an annoyed glance. “Is what this letter says true? He is in the process of selling off the company?”

“He is indeed. And after receiving the reports on his operations, I believe we can expect him to pay us a visit and attempt to obtain more money before disappearing without the trace.”

“Well, if he does that, he will disappear without the trace,” the boy put the letter away, scowling at
It. “We will have to find a new associate. Can you check the backstories and pick a reliable one?”

“Is this a question?” Sebastian raised his eyebrow and smirked, getting another annoyed glare in response.

“No,” his Master said shortly. “It’s an order. I want this person found by the end of the week.”

“Consider it done,” Sebastian bowed, his head already filling with possible options.

A part of him hoped that Mr. Damian would try to seek out his Master. It’d been a while since they’d had the last game and Sebastian looked forward to dedicating a day to the implementation of an elaborate trap. His Master liked to devise detailed scenarios of torment, and being who he was, Sebastian enjoyed bringing them to life.

The boy had quite an imagination.

***

Mr. Damian showed the utmost discourtesy by announcing his intention to visit the Phantomhives on the day he was supposed to arrive. Disgruntled at the lost opportunity to prepare everything meticulously, Sebastian went to wake his Young Master, wondering if he already had a plan, but to his surprise, entertaining Mr. Damian seemed the last thing on the boy’s mind.

Ignoring the feeling of being taken aback had become an integral part of him by now. Smiling as if he hadn’t expected anything but for the boy to drink his tea, Sebastian turned to leave, only to have a dart thrown at him.

That was new.

Catching it, he lingered for a moment, trying to figure out what it meant. Another test? Or an invitation to play darts?

“How was that?” Sebastian inquired, glancing at his Master with a strange but already familiar fondness. Perhaps this was a hint as to what his lord was planning for Mr. Damian? Turning him into a target for darts?

“Let us leave the fun and games for later, shall we?” he added. The boy just looked at him, grave and vaguely displeased as always, but…

“Yes,” he allowed. “I agree, Sebastian.”

At last.

The boy was planning something.

The answer came two and a half hours before Mr. Damian was due to arrive. After requesting a
dessert and being denied, and issuing a perplexing order to take down the Phantomhives’ portrait, his Master finally turned to face him with a small, eerie smile, startlingly similar to the one Sebastian himself often wore.

“So,” he drawled, “I was thinking to make today’s game into an actual game.”

“Darts?” Sebastian guessed, but his lord just frowned.

“Why would you think that?” he asked. “No. I meant the game you and I created. Mr. Damian is going to choose his own fate based on the movements he’ll make. I’ll be playing against him. You’ll be listening.”

Unsurprisingly, excitement shone inside him with intensity, and Sebastian felt how his lips parted in an anticipatory grin. The boy’s smile also widened and they shared a moment of quiet, gleeful amusement.

“Understood,” Sebastian said. “Shall I kill him at the end?”

A small crease marred his Master’s forehead.

“I don’t know yet,” he admitted. “Fraud is a mediocre crime and I’m still not sure of his intentions. Ultimately, it’s going to depend on how much he annoys me during our meeting.”

Sebastian bowed his head, hiding another smile.

He hoped his Master would be extremely annoyed.

How intriguing this day was turning out to be.

“Lose your legs in the Forest of Confusion,” his Master announced, and Sebastian committed it to memory, his mind flaring with vivid ideas.

Mr. Damian gasped, the odour of his confusion and anxiety creeping through the several floors at once.

“It’s your turn again,” his Master’s voice sounded so genuine and innocent that if Sebastian hadn’t known him, he would buy into this performance, forming an entirely wrong opinion of the boy. “I’m out for a turn, after all.”

Mr. Damian, of course, couldn’t boast of the same. The odour weakened, changing into relief, though his anxiety remained partly, and when he laughed, it sounded tense and unnatural.

Understandable. Mr. Damian was wary of the boy despite the smugness and contempt he clearly felt for him. Young Master had been playing a psychological game on him for over an hour now — he shifted between abrupt and attentive, harsh and carefree, dismissive and interested, and Sebastian could sense how their guest was slowly losing his patience, growing angrier and
disturbed by the minute.

“Your body is burned within the crimson flames,” his Master murmured, quietly and thoughtfully, and Sebastian grinned, pleased that the scenario he had drawn himself was going to be used today. Mr. Damian’s gasp sounded louder this time and the smell intensified anew as his anxiety grew into irrational fear — fear of the boy he was playing against.

It was perfect, it had to be perfect, but one thing stopped Sebastian from enjoying every second of this game.

His Master was upset by something. While he tormented Mr. Damian skilfully, he seemed distracted at times, his thoughts elsewhere, in the places Sebastian couldn’t hope to reach.

The inability to understand the boy’s thinking process was intolerable and more fascinating than all the mysteries Hell hid in its depths. He was rarely in an agreeable mood but the degrees of his general dissatisfaction varied, and Sebastian could only guess what it depended on. The nightmares? The cases or the lack of them? What was happening in his head now, what caused his sour mood today?

And this mood certainly wouldn’t improve after he saw the ruined garden and the meal Sebastian was going to serve.

Sighing, Sebastian glanced in the direction where his Master was and then moved towards the kitchen.

He had to control what the servants were doing. They had already ruined a meal — Sebastian couldn’t let them destroy it entirely.

***

His Master showed admirable restraint when he saw the garden. Nothing at all was reflected on his face — he proceeded to take his place, holding his head high, though he did send Sebastian a livid glare when Mr. Damian wasn’t looking.

“Tonight’s dinner is a Beef Tataki-don prepared by our own chef, Bard,” Sebastian introduced and grimaced internally at the shocked gaping of both Mr. Damian and his Master. He was fairly sure that he would win their guest over — several persuasive lies, and he would accept everything told to him in a desperate attempt to be considered a part of the sophisticated society.

His Master, on the other hand, was another matter entirely. No sweet lies would persuade him that this Japanese dish was a worthy dinner for English noblemen.

“Is this dinner?” Mr. Damian stared as if he was being offered poison and with his peripheral vision, Sebastian noticed how his lord stiffened, insulted. Then he began to eat, using chopsticks so masterfully, like he had a vast experience with them and like he was served this very meal weekly.

Quickly masking his surprise, Sebastian focused on Mr. Damian and then on Mey-Rin, but his
thoughts stayed on his Master unwaveringly.

He had no doubts that the boy was displeased with his presentation of a meal and yet he chose to pretend that everything was fine as long as they had a guest, even if the opinion of said guest meant nothing, considering the end that was waiting for him.

His Master demonstrated quite a fascinating sense of solidarity with his staff. Sebastian couldn’t help but wonder how far it could go.

When Mey-Rin’s hand slipped and she began to pour the wine onto the tablecloth, Sebastian thought that he was going to get an answer to his question sooner than he’d expected. He watched, feeling unusually tired, but the sharp inhale from his Master, the way his body froze sent sparks of adrenaline through his veins, breaking him from his immovability.

Of course. The spilled wine. They had gone through the exact replica of this scene recently, during Lyndon’s case, and the boy reacted painfully, like he did during his nightmares. Sebastian could only guess what he was seeing — drawing comparison between the wine and the blood? The place where they had met had a ritual table covered with it. Was this what his mind conjured?

How humanly weak. But at the same time, Sebastian couldn’t let the scene repeat itself — as a butler, he had to make sure that his Master looked his best.

In a flash, moving so quickly that no human could notice, Sebastian snatched the stained tablecloth from the surface, careful so the glasses and the plates remained untouched. Mr. Damian continued to devour the meal greedily, not even seeing the changes that had occurred, but Young Master relaxed palpably. A moment, and he resumed eating, the stupor dissipating as suddenly as it had appeared.

“He really is talented,” Mr. Damian noticed approvingly.

“He only did what was natural as my servant,” the boy dismissed. He sounded cordial but Sebastian caught a shadow of tension in his voice. Was he relieved that the disaster had been averted or angry that Sebastian had almost let it happen?

He could always assess his lord’s mood by using an expression that tended to both amuse and infuriate him.

“It is as my Master says,” Sebastian agreed. “I am merely one hell of a butler.”

The boy did react, turning to look at him, but his expression remained unreadable.

Well. Not much of an answer.

The dinner continued, though the darkness surrounding the table began to thicken, and interestingly, it was coming not from Sebastian but from the boy himself.

At some point, when Sebastian was smoothening the napkin, small fingers snaked around his wrist and tapped against it. At first he frowned in confusion, but a second later, he recognised the rhythm of the tapping.

The silent language he and his Master had developed a while ago, after their first case. The language no one in the universe knew but them.

‘Have you heard everything?’
Carefully, Sebastian bent down, pretending to adjust the plate, and touched the boy’s knee.

‘I have, my lord. Everything is already planned.’

‘Good.’

Mr. Damian noticed nothing.

The clock continued to tick away the remaining measures of his life.

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Like Sebastian had expected, his Master didn’t appreciate the Italian tea. His grim mood continued to grow, and a small, cold smile touched his lips only as he said, “Be diligent until the end, as befits the hospitality of the Phantomhive family.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian swore. His eyes flared in hungry anticipation but faded back when his Master’s face darkened again as he immersed himself into some distant thoughts.

What was wrong with him? Was it connected to his demand to have the portrait of his family taken down? The game was boring when the boy’s attention wasn’t focused wholly on it.

He had to spice things up.

“Would you like a bet, Young Master?” Sebastian offered, and was satisfied to see a return of light into the blue eye.

“A bet? What kind of it?”

“Whether Mr. Damian is going to survive what will be done to him.”

The boy frowned.

“You’re going to burn him, aren’t you? How could he possibly survive it?”

“Ah, but burning can be done in many different ways.” The boy shivered and Sebastian smiled wider. “However,” he added, “in our case, he might indeed die. I was thinking about the oven.”

“The oven!” his Master’s jaw dropped in a quite unappealing way. “What do you think he is, a pie? He’s not going to die if you lock him in an oven!”

“I’m saying he will. So, do you accept the bet?”

The boy studied him suspiciously, probably trying to imagine the ways in which Sebastian could be trying to trick him. Silly child, didn’t he know that being locked in an oven could be as deadly as being directly set on fire? He clearly had no idea about the temperature there.

“I accept,” the boy said finally. “The head of the Phantomhive estate cannot back down from a
challenge. However, I have a condition. He has to be alive and capable of leaving the manor by himself after you’re done with him.”

It was Sebastian’s turn to think. Leave it to his Master to complicate the already complicated plans.

Then again, this was what made the game all the more exciting.

“Agreed,” he uttered slyly. “If I win and he dies on his way to the nearest carriage, you will help me bury him.”

“What?!”

“Of course, you’re always free to refuse to participate.”

“No,” the boy snapped immediately, and Sebastian’s lips twitched. “You are on. But no cheating and no twisting my condition. It’s an order.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And if I win?”

“Naturally, I will bury Mr. Damian myself.”

Huffing, his Master rolled his eye.

“That’s hardly a prize,” he said. “No. If he lives, you won’t kill him — let him tell the underworld about what happens to those who cross me. As for you… you will tell me your true name.”

Shock seized his stomach, twisting it in a curious, testing way. Sebastian stared, temporarily incapacitated, as his brain scrambled to make sense of this request. How could the child possibly be this audacious? Demons did not give away their true names, not for anything in the world. The power and intimacy it presupposed was startling and no one in their right mind would enter a bargain like this.

His Master caught on his hesitation and his eye flashed in triumph.

“Of course, you’re always free to refuse to participate,” he mocked, and Sebastian clenched his jaw tightly.

It didn’t matter. He wouldn’t lose.

“No,” he replied, trying to sound calm. Then he mimicked, “You’re on.”

A slow, cunning smirk was what he got in response.

***

With their bet, Sebastian lost half of interest in Mr. Damian’s torture. What he was fixated on was
his direct demise that had to happen outside of the house.

That didn’t mean that he wasn’t enjoying the torment itself, though. Creating an illusion and placing his Master’s voice over it was amusing, and seeing how their guest’s face crumbled in horror and blind panic was almost as delicious as his screams that shook the walls when Sebastian twisted his leg in the opposite direction.

The servants didn’t follow Mr. Damian — perhaps even they understood that a game of some kind was ongoing.

The brainless creature had facilitated Sebastian’s task significantly by readily falling for a trap and crawling into an oven willingly, even being as courteous as closing the door behind himself.

Well, then, all he had to do now was control the time and the temperature.

Mr. Damian was let out when a bigger part of his body was burned. He limped to the door as quickly as he could, panting and wheezing, his eyes almost white from shock and pain, but as he reached the park, he began to slow down. A few more minutes, and his body would give away entirely; a few more hours, if he was lucky, and he would be dead.

Mr. Damian yelled, desperately and loudly, and his yell was followed by Young Master’s satisfied laughter. Sebastian’s mouth quirked upwards.

‘Give it time, my lord,’ he thought wryly. ‘It’s not long now.’

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Their guest died at half past midnight, between the trees in the park surrounding the Phantomhives’ manor. Feeling the delectable satisfaction brewing in his blood, Sebastian entered his Master’s bedroom and approached his bed, squeezing his shoulder slightly.

Normally, he wouldn’t have interrupted the boy’s sleep, but he supposed it could be counted as an extraordinary circumstance.

“My lord,” Sebastian called deceptively sweetly. “Wake up.”

“Sebastian?” the boy blinked sleepily, rubbing his eyes. “What’s wrong? What time is it?”

“Half past midnight. I’m afraid Mr. Damian has just died outside the manor and now I require your assistance.”

His Master stared at him in confusion before the realisation sank in and he started shaking his head in childish denial.

“It can’t be,” he moaned. “He was alive! I heard him scream!”
“It was then,” Sebastian shrugged, trying to keep his expression blank, even though a strange tickling sensation slid under his ribs, pushing laughter up his throat. “Now he’s dead. People rarely survive burns of that kind, especially if they are not treated.”

“You cooked him in the oven!” his Master nearly shrieked. “How could he get deadly burns from it?”

“My lord, I will gladly demonstrate it on you. If you agree to get into the oven—”

As he thought, his Master’s eyes flashed before narrowing to dangerous slits.

“Don’t even think about it,” he warned. “You have a contract to fulfil.”

“So do you. I trust you remember the conditions of our bet?”

Growling, Young Master threw the blanket off and stood up, glaring at him.

“Fine,” he snapped. “Dress me and let’s go.”

***

All Sebastian’s predictions came to life with absolute accuracy.

His Master didn’t react to the sight of the burned body much — his noise twitched, a somewhat haunted look entered his eyes, but it was all gone in an instant.

His Master also hated digging. By the fifth minute, he was breathing heavily, a thin layer of sweat covering his forehead, his clothes stained beyond salvation. It was a good thing that Sebastian had picked the least expensive outfit or he would be forced to subject the boy to a visit to a tailor.

In addition, his Master didn’t make a sound of protest after they left the manor. He admitted his defeat with dignity and was honestly completing his part of the bargain.

None of his previous Masters would have done the same.

Sebastian watched fondly as the hole in the ground got deeper and as his lord continued to dig even though his hands were already shaking from exertion.

A pathetically weak body but a stunning strength of spirit. A combination as unique as the boy’s soul was, so dark and so light simultaneously, compelling in its contradictory nature.

“You said I had to help you bury him, not do everything by myself,” the boy finally uttered, rubbing his forehead with his sleeve. “Don’t just stand there.”

“If you insist,” Sebastian agreed and his Master snorted.

“I do not insist. If you didn’t want to do any work, you had to mention it in your conditions.”
“Fair enough. Although perhaps this experience will show you that burying an adult is a daunting task.”

“You’re a demon! Don’t tell me you have difficulties with digging a grave!”

“I might, at least when you forbid me to use my powers.”

Sebastian realised that this sounded like a complaint and an admission of his imperfection too late — the boy was already gaping at him in disbelief.

“You are still strong!” he exclaimed. “Or do you lack the appropriate human skills? I can always organise a practice session with the Undertaker for you.”

Sebastian blinked, surprised at the suggestion, before laughing quietly.

“Thank you but I believe I will manage myself,” he said.

For a while, they were silent, digging together. When the grave got deep enough, Sebastian asked, “Would you prefer to carry him by the legs or by the hands?”

His Master’s face scrunched up in disgust but once again, he did not complain.

“By the legs,” he replied belatedly and approached the body, looking at its ruined shoes.

“You wish to avoid seeing his face up close?” Sebastian wondered, squeezing the burnt hands and waiting for the boy to grab the legs.

“I don’t particularly care,” his Master said, wrinkling his nose but taking the body by the ankles obediently. “I don’t like the eyes of the dead, though.”

This admission was surprisingly open for someone as reserved as Ciel Phantomhive, so Sebastian had to lower his head to hide his bemused expression.

Then again, the boy was always far more honest at nights.

Maybe he could use it to his advantage.

When Mr. Damian disappeared under the pile of dirt, his Young Master sighed tiredly but his eyes looked oddly satisfied.

“I want to mark this grave,” he muttered. “Bring me a stone. The bigger, the better.”

Sebastian nodded and went in search of a suitable rock. When he brought one back and planted it in the middle, his Master touched its surface lovingly, a grim smirk still reflected on his lips.

“Maybe we should create an engraving later,” he added. “Something inconspicuous.”

“You are positively bloodthirsty today,” Sebastian drawled, responding with an equally sinister smile. “Fine. But that would be tomorrow. Right now, it is time for you to take a bath and go to sleep.”

“I was sleeping,” the boy pointed out. “You woke me up.”

“I won’t wake you up again this night. That I can promise as your devoted butler.”

The boy snorted rudely but didn’t say anything. By the time they returned to the manor, his eyelids
were already drooping, so Sebastian had to hold him during the bath so he wouldn’t fall down and embarrass himself.

When his Master finally got into bed, he fell asleep immediately. Sebastian covered him with a blanket, adjusted his pillow… and froze.

Someone was observing him. Someone who had no business being here — the same stalker he had already sensed several times. He’d done nothing before, but the intruder had crossed all boundaries by entering Sebastian’s direct territory.

It was time for a friendly talk.

Sebastian left the room unhurriedly, as if he hadn’t noticed anything, but as soon as the door closed, he dashed outside, towards one of trees.

His source of annoyance was indeed standing there, on one of the branches, studying the darkened windows of the house. Sebastian crashed into him viciously, knocking him on the ground, then throwing him against another tree. His guest fell and hissed angrily, his golden eyes flashing red.

“Leraje,” Sebastian greeted coldly, watching how the demon got to his feet, flinging dirt off his green jacket. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

“You noticed me, then?” Leraje’s lips twisted in an ugly, condescending grin. “Finally. I was beginning to wonder if your intuition is gone… Sebastian Michaelis. Picking this name for yourself — do you think this is funny?”

“My Master picked my first name. I only came up with the last one.”

“You always turn everything into a joke,” Leraje spat, narrowing his eyes in clear distaste. “You sicken me. Someone like you doesn’t deserve your position.”

Sebastian laughed lowly.

“Were you stalking me to tell me that?” he asked dryly. “You could have come up with a new wording, at least.”

“I didn’t come for that.”

“Then why? What do you want?”

Leraje said nothing and Sebastian’s eyebrows rose.

“I can sense that you currently have a Master,” he noted. “And yet you dedicate your time to watching me. There is also something strange about your contract — it is only half formed.”

“My Master doesn’t have a wish yet,” Leraje replied, looking at him with intensity that Sebastian found atypical.

“You entered a contract with someone who doesn’t have a wish?” he sneered. “Such soul cannot be of a high quality.”

“You are concerned with quality now? Although seeing how many efforts you’re investing into your current contract, I’m not surprised. I’ve watched you for a while now. Enough to say that you’re being unnatural.”

Sebastian had never particularly minded Leraje’s amusing attempts to insult him, but this made
him stiffen. Undoubtedly sensing it, Leraje’s lips split in a contemptuous smirk.

“You are turning into a lapdog,” he said. “You are embarrassing yourself and us, by association.”

“You will never be in a position to tell me how to behave myself,” Sebastian noted mildly, though the darkness in him swirled, itching to attack Leraje and to finally silence him after all the centuries of petty arguments and jealous attacks.

Leraje had quite a respectable position himself but his envy towards those of higher ranks had never let him enjoy his existence. He spent all his time either in search of ancient artefacts or by bothering others, always striving to reaffirm his status. He and Sebastian clashed more times than Sebastian could count and usually, he regarded these encounters as entertaining. He had complex relationships with the majority of demons; few were on friendly terms with him but he always commanded respect. No one but Leraje was bold enough to bother him so steadily, and Leraje himself was hardly a serious opponent.

Now, though, Sebastian wasn’t sure what to think. Leraje was looking at him like he knew something he didn’t, and the sneer on his face appeared far more malicious and intense than usually.

“We’ll see,” Leraje said finally.

“What do you want?” Sebastian repeated, annoyed now. “Shouldn’t you help your Master figure out their wish? Why are you wasting time on stalking me?”

“Oh, my Master is going to find his wish soon, have no doubts about that,” Leraje promised darkly. “As for why I am here… it’s none of your business.”

“It is my business when you step into my territory. This area belongs to my Master. I am tasked with removing the intruders and right now, you are one of them.”

“I have no interest in your Master.”

“That would be a first,” Sebastian drawled mockingly. “You always wish for things that don’t belong to you.”

“And you are always breaking the rules. I have seen you with your Master and I have seen your Master. He keeps your feather. You keep his tooth. Revolting, the both of you.”

A sense of unease settled, spreading an uncharacteristic anxiety through Sebastian’s body and making the lines of his darkness combine, forming into his true shape.

A feather? Leraje had to have been watching them for longer than Sebastian had thought. How could he have not noticed?

“Well,” he said, trying to sound calm, even though hostility inside him flared with new force, “we all have our peculiarities when we’re contracted. You collect trophies as well, don’t you?”

“I do,” Leraje agreed, “but I suspect that our reasoning differs. Regardless, I don’t intend to discuss it with you. I’ve seen and heard everything I needed. Be assured, I won’t enter your territory again. Not in the nearest future, anyway.”

Sebastian bared his teeth, but before he could do anything, Leraje soared high into the air with a derisive laugh, blending with the darkness.
Well. That was… unsettling.

Sebastian shook off the traces of his true form, waited until the sensation of foreign presence disappeared entirely, and returned to the house.

Leraje had never been a worthy opponent. Sebastian sincerely doubted it was about to change.

And yet, a dark foreboding had already taken roots, and no matter how hard Sebastian tried, he couldn’t dislodge them.
Hi! So sorry for such a long wait between the chapters, I was absolutely flooded with work. Now I have a semi-vacation for about 4 months, so I hope to write a lot during this time. Thank you for all your mind-blowing support, I appreciate it so much! Time for a chapter with E2 events - hope you'll enjoy it! :)

*Warning*: with the content of E2, there is some child physical abuse and rape threats.

Sebastian was watching him with dark, inscrutable eyes. Anyone else would have said that there was nothing but deference there, but Ciel knew better. He’d learned how to read every reddish flash of emotions, every tiny wrinkle or crease that Sebastian’s unnaturally flawless face reflected. And he could say confidently that right now, Sebastian was planning something. Again. Something aimed to provoke a reaction from him.

It would have been amusing if Ciel had any idea of what this plan might entail and what prompted Sebastian to start planning in the first place. Then again, when wasn’t this demon planning something? Even just to spite him — especially to spite him.

“Keep the key with you,” Ciel ordered coldly, narrowing his eyes when Sebastian only glanced at it with disinterest. Strange. Their new case clearly didn’t stir any curiosity in him. Ciel, on the other hand, found it quite thrilling. It was the third visit Lord Randall had paid him this month, and seeing how much it cost him to even talk to him, let alone ask for favours, filled Ciel with tingling pleasure.

Smuggling and drugs again, only this time, a much bigger scheme was at play. There was a rat among the Evil Noblemen themselves, one that desperately wanted access to the storehouse of drugs Sebastian had intercepted a few days ago. Ciel was holding a key to it currently, and Lord Randall had asked him to keep it until the rat was found. Since he’d asked so prettily, who was Ciel to refuse?

He thought Sebastian would be interested in establishing the rat’s identity, but it seemed like he was already preoccupied with something.

This couldn’t be good.

Finally, Sebastian accepted the key, murmuring meaningless words of agreement with his order, and Ciel watched him silently for a while, trying to understand what was on his mind.

Some of Sebastian’s games were thrilling, he couldn’t deny it. Some… not so much. For whatever reason, he had a distinct feeling that this one was going to fall into the latter category.

“The supper is ready, Master,” Sebastian purred. “Would you like to eat it here or in the dining room?”

Ciel frowned, taken aback. What was it with Sebastian and his meal-schedule obsession?
“In the dining room,” he decided. “I’ve spent too much here today as it is.”

“As you wish. Everything will be served in a minute,” Sebastian bowed and left the office, and Ciel followed him with his gaze, the wheels in his brain turning rapidly in an attempt to figure out what was happening.

Still nothing.

Sighing, he stood up and slowly walked out as well.

He didn’t have time for Sebastian’s ridiculousness right now.

He had a rat to catch.

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Three hours later, lying in his bed, Ciel regretted not having paid enough attention.

He felt terrible. His stomach was rolling in discomfort, sending wave after wave of chilling coldness through his body, and if it wasn’t bad enough, nausea was twisting it into a tight, painful knot. He couldn’t stop shivering.

He’d been ill enough times to recognise how it felt, and whatever was happening to him now wasn’t it.

Which left only one option.

“Sebastian,” Ciel hissed. Even one word threatened to push nausea over the edge, and he had to take several deep breaths to keep it down. “Come… here. Now.”

A few moments later, Sebastian opened the door, cautiously peering inside.

“Young Master?” he asked. Ciel glowered at him, clenching the blanket tighter around himself. He couldn’t speak, not right now, not if he wanted to avoid vomiting. Thankfully, Sebastian seemed to finally sense that something was wrong because he quickly approached his bed, frowning. Ciel’s eyes immediately bored into his face, seeking anything incriminating, but Sebastian appeared genuinely puzzled.

“You have a fever,” he concluded, his frown deepening. “But there was no chance for you to catch a cold. You’ve barely left the house this past week.”

Did this idiot think fever only appeared as the result of the cold?

“You did something,” Ciel spat and gritted his teeth when another intense wave of queasiness crawled up his throat, even more insistently this time.

If he hadn’t been staring at Sebastian so intently, he might have missed a flash of recognition on his face, but as it was, he caught everything.
That bastard! He had done something. He must have tempered with his food. But why? It seemed purposeless and it was a direct contradiction to their contract.

“Did you poison me?” Ciel pushed out, furious. “You!..”

“I didn’t,” Sebastian denied, but he sounded almost uncertain. Ciel didn’t say anything, only glared, and Sebastian’s expression turned sour. “I did add a medicine into your tea,” he admitted. Ciel’s eyes widened incredulously, but before he could find words, Sebastian continued. “It was a calming draught. Lau recommended it as an effective method to fight against bad dreams.”

For a second, Ciel was so enraged that he thought he would explode with it. He clenched his fists so hard that he nearly broke his fingers, trembling with a barely suppressed need for violence. Yelling wouldn’t help — no, it would have to come later. Right now, he needed something else. Something, anything to pay Sebastian back in whatever limited capacity he could currently afford.

Another pang of nausea made him grimace, and then a childishly vindictive idea came into his mind.

Sebastian wanted to cure him from the nightmares? Let him enjoy the results.

Grinning viciously, Ciel leaned forward and let go, and vomit burst through, spilling all over Sebastian’s trousers and boots.

Relief came immediately, sharpened by the way Sebastian’s face went blank. He stood still for a while, resembling a statue, and Ciel smirked at him, though fury continued to boil his insides.

“Clean this up,” he whispered. “And change your clothes. You reek.”

It was Sebastian’s turn to stare at him incredulously, as if he couldn’t believe his audacity. His jaw tightened, but in the end, he nodded sharply.

When he left, Ciel pushed against his pillow, trying to breathe through his nose. The nausea returned, and with it, his fury at Sebastian flared even brighter.

He didn’t know what was worse, the fact that Sebastian had shared something this personal and disgustingly weak about him with Lau or that he’d decided to slip him some unknown sleeping draught, following the recommendation of an opium-addicted fool!

Why was Sebastian so obsessed with his sick nightmare-based experiments? If it went any further, Ciel would have to come up with an order that would stop him from ever doing anything related to his dreams. Ciel had decided against it before — he wasn’t sure why, exactly. Maybe a part of him hoped that Sebastian would succeed at some point. Maybe he just cowardly craved his presence every time he woke up terrified, and giving an order would likely stop Sebastian from even coming to his room at night.

But this… this couldn’t go on. It was too much.

Sebastian returned quickly, removing all stains from the floor. Before he could say anything, though, Ciel leaned forward again, succumbing to another wave of nausea.

Sebastian looked positively murderous.

This was going to be a long night.
After the third instance of vomiting, even the brief echoes of humour left Ciel. Whatever remained in his stomach continued roiling. Sometimes, it became uncomfortably taut, making his throat contract again, and by the time the clock struck one o’clock, he was already exhausted.

Sebastian played the role of a butler well, probably compensating for his earlier idiocy. He cleaned him, pushed a bucket to him whenever he sensed another round of vomiting, and kept stupid questions to a minimum.

After the fourth time, Ciel felt so weak that he could barely sit. His mouth tasted disgusting and was excruciatingly dry, and his temples kept pulsing with white-hot pain.

“If I die because you’ve poisoned me,” he murmured, “I forbid you to eat my soul. You absolutely don’t deserve it.”

“You won’t die from this, you silly child,” Sebastian sounded mocking, but despite his state, Ciel could hear the same note of uncertainty in his voice.

Sebastian wasn’t sure what was wrong. And naturally, he couldn’t know what the outcome of his scheme was going to be.

Ciel still hissed at the insult, wishing he could reply properly.

He hated feeling helpless. He **hated it.**

He had lived through illnesses and severe allergies both, and every time, even though the symptoms were familiar, there was a feeling of dread hiding in the most vulnerable part of his mind. Whenever he found himself confined to a bed, he worried that he would never leave it again. The fear of death was so overwhelming at times that all he could do was blink away the tears, hoping that his mother and Madam Red didn’t catch it.

Now, to his surprise, he felt no fear, even though the situation was decidedly and dangerously unfamiliar. There were only resentment and disappointment.

Entering a contract with a demon to die because of his failure to understand how human bodies worked? It was insulting. It was unacceptable.

Ciel gathered enough strength to send another angry glare to Sebastian. To his surprise, Sebastian looked almost worried. His brows were furrowed and he kept staring at him unblinkingly, as if trying to dissect him with his gaze and understand what was wrong.

“I will send Tanaka to you,” he said suddenly, and it was Ciel’s turn to frown.

“No,” he snapped. He didn’t want to see anyone else, not when he was feeling so terrible, so weak.

“It’s only for a short while,” Sebastian adjusted the blanket, wrapping it more tightly around Ciel. “I believe I should pay a visit to Lau.”

“In the middle of the night?”
Sebastian shrugged.

“He gave me that… thing,” he said, his lips twitching in contempt. “He must know its side-effects.”

Ciel didn’t want to admit it but it made sense. Why hadn’t he thought about it sooner?

“Fine,” he allowed. “You can go. But don’t send anyone else to me. I’ll be fine.”

Sebastian hesitated.

“Young Master—” he began.

“Shut up,” Ciel warned. “You don’t have the right to question my orders. I’ve had enough of your disobedience. Falling so lowly, taking advice from a human? Betraying personal matters of your Master to outsiders? I’m tempted to break the contract with you right now, and I will if you ever do something like this again.”

Sebastian’s eyes flashed, turning terrifyingly red for a moment. When he spoke, coldness was etched in his every word.

“If you do that, you won’t attain your revenge. And it won’t save your life.”

“Is that an euphemism for ‘I’ll kill you’? Please,” Ciel scoffed, even though his heart skipped a mournful beat. “As if I didn’t know that already. But keep abusing my trust like this and it won’t matter to me. I don’t forgive betrayal, Sebastian. I don’t care what motivated you — you had no right to do that. Repeat this mistake and making you pay might come to seem more satisfying to me than fulfilling my initial wish. Do you understand?”

Sebastian considered him carefully, his face unreadable again. Then he bowed his head slightly.

“I do, Master,” he said. “May I take my leave now?”

“You may.”

Sebastian gave him one last glance, and Ciel almost gaped at the obsessive hunger he suddenly glimpsed there. Irritation, boredom, and indifference were gone, replaced by something so dark and primal that he shivered.

Tightening his hold on the blanket, Ciel pulled it closer defensively, narrowing his eyes at Sebastian in a challenge, even though he knew he had nothing to back it up.

Fortunately, Sebastian bowed again and slid towards the door, melting in the darkness immediately.

The fire that had brought him through this conversation abruptly died out and Ciel focused on breathing evenly again.

At least when he was talking to Sebastian, it served as a distraction. Now, he was alone with unwelcome thoughts, and nausea was starting to crawl in his stomach again.

He felt dizzy. His head was still splitting apart and his skin felt so dry, as if it would wither at the slightest touch.

If anything, he felt much worse than at the beginning. What in the world was Lau’s drug made of?
Ciel didn’t know how much time had passed. He must have managed to fall asleep because he was startled back into reality by a cool piece of fabric placed against his forehead.

“Sebastian?” he muttered weakly.

“Yes,” Sebastian carefully smoothened the fabric. Then his cold fingers brushed against Ciel’s cheek and Ciel closed his eyes involuntarily, enjoying the comfort it brought.

Next moment, the fingers were gone, and instead a glass was pressed to his lips.

“You have to drink, Young Master,” Sebastian said quietly. “I’ve been informed that you might have dehydration after losing so much liquid.”

Ciel winced when a fresh wave of pain rolled through him, but he still sat up and accepted the glass.

“What did Lau say?” he mumbled. Sebastian watched how he drank the water intently before taking the glass from him and putting it on a bedside table.

“He said such reaction is extremely rare but possible,” he acknowledged finally. “You should feel better by morning. Until then, you have to drink as much water as you can. I’ll stay by your side, of course.”

“Joy,” Ciel drawled. He doubted he would be able to speak more than one word without vomiting.

The night was endless. He managed to drift off for half an hour at most until an intense stomach spasm woke him up, making him groan and reach for the bucket. Sebastian kept hovering over him, and the more time passed, the more liberties he allowed himself.

At first, he did only as much as was needed, but eventually, he seemed to start finding some twisted enjoyment in taking care of him. He began brushing Ciel’s hair from his face attentively, letting wet, sweaty strands slip through his fingers again and again, as if he was drying them. His other hand kept reaching for Ciel’s forehead, checking his temperature, and he constantly leaned closer, breaking into his personal space.

If it wasn’t for a small, sinister smile on his face, Ciel would have been suspicious. Since it was present, though, he could guess what motivated Sebastian to display such caring behaviour.

He was undoubtedly taking pleasure from how awfully Ciel felt and how he was forced to depend on him. Every time he moved closer, his smile widened, his eyes became gently indulgent, and Ciel just knew he was breathing in the smell of his fever, finding it delicious.

Sick bastard. But strangely, this combination of contrasting emotions put Ciel at ease. He accepted both comfort and deadly intent Sebastian showered him with, hating himself for the peace it brought him, but in the pauses between vomiting and drinking water, he pushed out as many degrading comments as he could think of.

“Tanaka performed his butler responsibilities much better than you,” he hissed. “You are incompetent. You bring more harm than value. Did you poison all your masters?”

“Even when you are so unwell, you still have the strength to insult me,” Sebastian remarked
almost fondly, pushing a glass back into his hands. Ciel accepted it, but his thoughts were already elsewhere.

He was going to seek retribution. And oh, how sweet it was going to be.

He already had some ideas.

***

Fever and nausea left in the morning, just like Lau had promised. Ciel finally got the chance to sleep, and when he woke up, it was already two in the afternoon.

Soon, he was sitting in his office, composing four very specific letters.

His yesterday’s brainstorming, no matter how brief it was, had brought extremely satisfying results. Only a limited number of Evil Noblemen knew about that specific storage, and even surface analysis clearly pointed at two possible candidatures.

Azzurro Vanel or Baron Diedrich.

Personally, Ciel considered the former to be a far likelier option, but he couldn’t cross Diedrich off his list simply because the man was a friend of his predecessor. Ciel had never had close personal contacts with him, so he was yet to form an opinion. Nevertheless, it was clear that both Vanel and Diedrich had an opportunity to cover their participation in the drug trade.

In the last months, Ciel and Sebastian had secretly investigated the majority of Evil Noblemen, and Vanel along with Diedrich were among the small group that they had failed to find much on. All their operations seemed perfectly legal and this in itself was suspicious. Besides, Vanel and Diedrich were the only ones in this group who stayed in the country within the last month, so only they could be involved.

Now, all Ciel had to do was wait until they wandered inside the trap and close it, and for this, he needed to invite them to the manor.

Of course, writing to them alone would be too revealing, so he also prepared a letter for Lau. Another one was for Randall. After all, finding a rat was his request, and having him witness how easily Ciel could succeed where he failed was too pleasing of a chance to miss it.

There was a knock on the door, swiftly followed by Sebastian entering the room, pushing a trolley with his dinner forward.

Ciel measured him with a cool look. Then he eyed the food, not letting any of his thoughts touch his face.

“How are you feeling, Master?” Sebastian inquired, so arrogantly confident that it immediately sent sparks of anger through him. Ciel didn’t reply. His head was still aching dully, but he definitely wasn’t going to accept any medicine for it.
“Bring Bard to my office,” he ordered. Sebastian’s eyebrows rose in a sign of controlled surprise, but he nodded and left.

Did this treacherous creature truly think that his yesterday’s transgression would remain unpunished? As if Ciel could ever be this lenient.

The food smelled delicious but he stubbornly refused to glance at it. He didn’t doubt that it would taste incredible — too bad it would have to remain uneaten.

Sebastian returned soon with Bard, who looked wary and guilty. Had he managed to blow up something again already?

“Afternoon, Master,” he mumbled. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes,” Ciel straightened, focusing on Bard entirely and ignoring Sebastian. “I would like you to be responsible for cooking from now on. Breakfast. Dinner. Supper. I can rely on you in this, can’t I?”

“Of course!” All hesitancy poured out of Bard and he grinned enthusiastically. “I won’t let you down, Master. I bet you’ll be impressed.”

“Hardly,” Sebastian said coldly, and Bard glared at him, clearly affronted.

“Hey! Just because I don’t know all your fancy recipes doesn’t mean I can’t cook! For your information—”

“Leave,” Sebastian said, and while his voice was perfectly pleasant this time, his face was anything but.

Bard backed away almost unconsciously before remembering himself. Squaring his shoulders, he turned to Ciel.

“Go,” Ciel allowed, satisfied that he’d managed to keep the amusement out of his words. “Start preparing dinner.”

“Yes, sir!” Bard saluted him before rushing out of the room, probably already thinking about what to cook. Sebastian didn’t deem it worthy to watch it — he stared at Ciel instead, and he looked so quietly livid that it felt even better than the reprieve from vomiting.

“Would you honestly entrust the preparation of your meals to Baldroy?” Sebastian asked icily. “I assure you, Young Master, his skills have not improved since the last time.”

“At least I can be sure that he won’t be trying to poison me,” Ciel drawled with great relish. Sebastian’s mouth fell open in an obvious surprise before he snapped it back shut, and Ciel gave him a brief, condescending smile. “Did you think I would accept the food you’ve prepared again?”

“I was—”

“Disloyal,” Ciel cut him off. “I told you, I don’t care about your reasoning. You betrayed me when I specifically asked you to never do that. So until you prove that you can be trusted at least in some capacity, I won’t be using your direct services. Go find something useful to do. Oh, and take this away from me,” Ciel nodded at the deliciously smelling plates still standing on the trolley. “Needless to say, I won’t be eating it.”

The aura Sebastian was emanating became even frostier while his eyes flashed a familiar, deadly red. Ciel drank it in, pleased with how easily he could find the most effective punishment. Since
being viewed as imperfect infuriated Sebastian, not having a chance to prove himself had to result in an even more intensive rage.

Sebastian didn’t move for a while, fixated on him as if he was torn between wanting to throttle and to consume him — or to do everything at once. Then he smiled slowly, his fury dissipating, replaced by his usual arrogance.

“Certainly, Young Master,” he uttered. “I hope Bard’s cooking will be to your taste.”

Ciel returned his cold gaze, saying nothing.

If Sebastian thought he was going to win here, he was deeply mistaken.

This was only stage one.

***

The second stage came later in the afternoon, when all letters were finished. Ciel nodded at Sebastian to gather them and said shortly, “Send them all.”

Sebastian complied, studying the names swiftly.

“Evil Noblemen?” he inquired. “Have you decided on the rat’s identity, then?”

Ciel had been hoping for this question.

“None of your business,” he informed calmly. “I’m going to see this case through by myself. I told you, I don’t need assistance of someone I can’t trust.”

Sebastian downright gaped at him. He obviously didn’t think Ciel would refuse his participation in the investigation — what, had he believed his punishment would be limited to being prohibited from cooking meals? Not this time.

“With all respect, Master, you won’t be able to solve this case by yourself,” Sebastian finally said, sneering. “There are too many intricacies of the drug trade. Even the smallest mistake can lead to your death.”

“Are you done?”

Sebastian almost hissed, and the first shadows flickered across the room. Ciel leaned back against his chair, deeply amused.

“Oh, and while we’re at it,” he added, “I want you to give the key from the storehouse to Lau. He can keep it until I need it.”

The room became even darker. Sebastian’s hands twitched, as if he was one step away from wrapping them around Ciel’s throat, and despite the palpable danger that filled the air, Ciel hadn’t felt this entertained in ages.
Sebastian was so easy to play at times. And yes, he was right — since Ciel would have to play a live-bait, his life would be in danger. He did hope that the servants or even Lau would notice the attempt on his safety on time, but even if they didn’t, he had a back-up plan in place.

He would have to depend on Sebastian, but the good thing was, despite everything, Sebastian was still bound by the contract. As long as he remained interested in it, he would fulfil his basic obligations.

And Ciel would find a way to twist it to suit his agenda.

***

After Sebastian left with the letters, there wasn’t much left to do. His head continued to pound unpleasantly and until this case was finished, Ciel wasn’t going to accept another one.

He didn’t know why, but his feet brought him outside, to the Phantomhives burial ground. He hadn’t been there for a long time and he couldn’t say what possessed him to go there now. However, his hesitancy evaporated when he realised that there was already someone else there.

Madam Red was easy to recognise, with her bright, all-red outfit. She was standing near the grave of Vincent Phantomhive, unmoving and strangely sombre. Seeing her so grim was a rare thing, so Ciel wavered for a second, unsure of what to say.

“Madam,” he finally uttered. His aunt’s back stiffened. She turned to look at him, and for a second, something ugly brimmed in her eyes. Before Ciel could determine what it was, though, a wide smile split her face.

“Nephew!” Madam Red rushed forward and Ciel tried hard not to recoil when she grabbed him, pulling him to her chest in an affectionate embrace. “I apologise for intruding like this. I know I should have warned about my visit but…”

“You are always welcome here,” Ciel lied, smiling stiffly. When she finally let him go, he immediately made a small step back, putting distance between them. “Would you like to have supper?”

Madam Red hesitated but then nodded.

“I would love to,” she muttered softly.

They returned to the house and were immediately greeted by a loud, crashing noise from the kitchen.

Bard.

Suppressing a heavy sigh, Ciel led his aunt to the living room and went to investigate. To his surprise, Sebastian was already there, observing the damage with cool, derisive expression.

“I’m afraid your meal is going to be late, Master,” he drawled. Ciel shrugged, pretending to be
unconcerned.

“I shall wait,” he announced. “The only thing that matters is that Bard’s meal will be actually safe for eating.”

“If you think so,” Sebastian replied, but his face became sour and Ciel had to hide a content smirk.

“I do have a task for you,” he said. “Madam Red has joined us for today. You’ll be cooking a supper for her as well as for our guests who are likely to arrive tomorrow. I trust it you won’t poison them, too?”

Sebastian’s hands twitches again. Something feral flashed in his eyes, and Ciel was half-prepared to be thrown against the wall and bashed against it repeatedly.

In the end, Sebastian only inclined his head.

“Yes, my lord,” he said.

It sounded like a threat.

***

Letting Madam Red meet Lau was one of Ciel’s biggest mistakes. Lau arrived next morning, just in time for breakfast, and as soon as they saw each other, they clicked to the point where tearing them apart became nearly impossible.

“Solving a case without me!” Madam Red exclaimed. “Why, nephew, I might be able to help you!”

“I don’t need your help,” Ciel said through gritted teeth. Oh, how much he regretted inviting this woman to his house. She was going to spoil everything.

“The more, the merrier, isn’t it?” Lau asked, smiling serenely. “What do you think, Ran-Mao?”

“I will definitely be present at your meeting,” Madam Red said confidently. “We’ll find your rat. I have an eye for such things.”

“And what an eye it is,” Lau drawled appreciatively. The room shook at the sound of Madam Red’s flustered laughter and Ciel rubbed his eye, hoping that when he opened it again, he would find himself alone.

Fortunately, his aunt could never handle sitting for a long time, so soon enough, she grabbed Lau and dragged him to the library, to show him the Phantomhives’ Chinese literature collection. Ciel waited until all sounds went mute and finally allowed himself to relax, loosening his grip on the cup of the most disgusting tea in his life. How could Bard fail even in such a simple task? What was difficult about making tea?

“Master,” Sebastian’s purring voice came right from behind his back, and to Ciel’s annoyance, he
wasn’t even startled. His mind had long since started associating Sebastian with something inherent and omnipresent, so his attempts to take him aback with his unexpected appearances didn’t work.

“Is there something you need?” he asked curtly. Sebastian moved in his area of focus and offered him a tray with something. A tea set? Why would…

Oh.

“You’ve found a Haviland set,” Ciel commented contemplatively. In blue, gold, and white, just as he’d asked. How had Sebastian managed that? Ciel was positively sure that this colour combination didn’t exist. He’d been anticipating for Sebastian to admit defeat, but it seemed he’d somehow completed the task.

Why now? Did it have any connection to their current state of affairs?

Ciel had always been sure that Sebastian despised having to take care of him, but yesterday had shown that he hated not being allowed to do it even more. He appeared personally offended at the dish Bard had cooked for supper last night, glowering in the corner of the dining room. Naturally, Ciel made sure to finish every bit of it, even though the taste of the overcooked fish was haunting him all night, threatening another round of nausea.

That brought him to a question — was Sebastian hoping to appease him? Bringing the long-awaited Haviland tea set after more than a month of nothing… he must have searched for it during the night with a renewed vigour. Definitely too drastic of a measure for it to mean nothing, and all the more strange since yesterday, Sebastian hadn’t seemed to be in an appeasing mood.

“Good,” Ciel acknowledged. He couldn’t stop himself from grimacing, though, especially when Sebastian’s face lit up with a self-satisfied smirk.

“Would you like some tea in it?” he asked, steadily ignoring the fact that technically, Ciel was already holding this very drink in his hand.

Ciel deliberated. He had no intention of cancelling Sebastian’s punishment, but he would have to start easing it a bit. Living on Bard’s cooking wasn’t sustainable, not in the long run, and asking Tanaka to cook wouldn’t be appropriate.

“Fine,” he uttered at last. “But be quick. I still have things to do.”

Sebastian looked genuinely pleased. Bowing and practically radiating smugness, he left the dining room, and when the door closed, Ciel snorted quietly.

Who would have thought that a demon would find joy in getting a chance to make tea? It was laughable, how easily Sebastian fell into the trap of their contract.

Ciel would have to monitor his own behaviour carefully to make sure he didn’t do the same. He might be holding the reins of control right now but he knew, he just knew that it could change any moment.

Sebastian had a disturbing tendency to leave him speechless, and not in a good way. With an active case that he had to solve, having an unpredictable demon-butler who alternated between wanting to crush him and hoping to gain his approval was dangerous.

He would have to stay on guard.
Solving the mystery of a rat was easy. Disappointingly so.

Azzurro Vanel revealed himself as soon as Ciel casually mentioned the drug trade and the fact that he was hoping for his, Lau’s, and Baron Diedrich’s help in identifying the traitor. Vanel’s head snapped up, his eyes widened, and Ciel could groan with how obvious and ungraceful he was.

This man didn’t deserve to be in the league of Evil Noblemen. What services could he possible provide to the Queen?

Baron Diedrich, on the contrary, barely reacted to the news. He seemed much more interested in consuming the sandwiches Sebastian had brought, but Ciel still studied him from time to time, only partly focused on the pool table.

“Not surprising,” Madam Red was saying. “The morals are quickly becoming a thing of the past. Even family members betray each other, so having a rat among one’s own kind is nothing unexpected.”

Her cheerfulness was gone, replaced with a mask of coldness and a mysterious half-smile. She looked so unusually collected that Ciel couldn’t help but admire her.

He’d never thought that she could act like this. Darkness seemed to come to her naturally and she easily stirred conversation to the topic Ciel was invested in. He hated to admit it but he had been wrong. Madam Red could blend in perfectly, even in the company of criminals.

The game and the talks continued, and Ciel watched with a growing feeling of curiosity. Yes, Vanel was almost definitely the rat he was looking for, but could he truly discard Diedrich? The man shared strange, unrefined mannerisms with Vanel. Unlike the latter, he seemed genuine, but Ciel had been in the underworld long enough to not rely on the first impressions.

Could they be working together? That would make the game much more interesting.

A pleasant, refreshing sensation tickled his mind at the thought and he smiled in amusement.

So many possibilities.

“Small talk aside, when will these mice be exterminated?” Lord Randall demanded impatiently, and Ciel raised his eyebrows. If the man was demanding extermination already, then he must have caught up on who Ciel’s main suspect was.

“Any moment now,” he remarked coolly. “The mice will want to sink their teeth into the forbidden cheese. We have the key to the storeroom where it’s hidden.”

Vanel actually gasped at this before quickly focusing on the pool table again.

What a pathetic fool. No, he was too obvious of a choice. His collaboration with Diedrich was looking more and more likely. In fact, Diedrich could be a mastermind behind the whole scheme.

Though for a member of a Ferro family to follow someone’s lead? Then again, Italians could be
difficult to predict. Too much of an unknown territory to make hasty conclusions.

Randall continued watching him suspiciously so Ciel leaned against his cue, smiling at him indulgently.

“However,” he drawled, “finding the nest and eliminating the mice might be somewhat tedious. I hope you are prepared to pay the fee for that.”

With how many times Randall had asked for his assistance in the recent months, Ciel had to come up with more creative ideas of payment. Just for the fun of it, last time, he’d asked Randall to get him the books from the Scotland Yard library, and the resulting ten minutes of growls and accusations were music to his ears.

“You vulture!” Randall, predictably, began to seethe again, and Ciel sighed, torn between feeling annoyed and entertained. Had Randall still not figured out that insulting him would bring him nowhere?

The excitement waned, slowly transforming back into boredom.

The meeting was only partly amusing and it was time to finish the game. In all senses at once.

Vanel or Vanel with Diedrich, it didn’t even matter. One or two of them were undoubtedly the rat, so all that he had to do now was wait for them to make their move.

***

Sitting in his office, Ciel basked in the warm glow of self-accomplishment. The day was extremely productive, and even though he’d decided against making a definite choice as to the rat’s identity, he knew that his goal was attained. One way or another, the rat was going to target him soon. He would have to stay in the manor to complicate his, or their, task.

Now, if he wasn’t mistaken, Sebastian was bound to use some excuse to see him. He wouldn’t be able to resist the chance to test the waters and be accepted back in the investigation.

Denying him would make today’s victory even sweeter.

Echoing his thoughts, there was a knock on the door, and Ciel’s lips trembled in a pleased smile before he forced it to dissipate.

Without waiting for an answer, Sebastian walked inside, holding a tray in his hands.

“Taylor’s Yorkshire Tea,” he presented, making an appropriately deferent expression. “It is a fairly new brand but I thought you might appreciate the richness of its herbal undertones.”

What could a demon who was incapable of distinguishing between a ruined and perfect dish by taste know about any undertones? Though Sebastian was rarely wrong, Ciel couldn’t deny it. Maybe one day, he’d ask him about it.
He nodded, indicating that he wanted the tea, and Sebastian obediently put a cup in front of him.

Did he really think Ciel could be fooled by his perfect façade at this point?

About a minute passed in silence, with Ciel inhaling the vapour and Sebastian waiting for his reaction. Finally, his intense scrutiny became bothersome, so Ciel acknowledged, “Good.”

Sebastian pressed his hand to his chest, bowing his head — a flawless embodiment of servitude and obedience.

“I’m glad that it pleases you, my lord,” he said. “Would you like a dessert with it? I’ve prepared a chocolate pretzel. Made of three different kinds of chocolate and drizzled with salted caramel.”

Ciel peered at the tray almost against his will in an attempt to catch a glimpse of this pretzel, and Sebastian’s face lost some of its fake politeness, reflecting a more genuine amusement.

“It is in the kitchen,” he clarified. “I couldn’t be confident that you would accept it, considering your newfound affinity for Bard’s cooking.”

Ciel rolled his eyes but said nothing. He really, really wanted that dessert. Terminating Sebastian’s punishment, though...

“All right,” he agreed haughtily. “Bring it to me. I suppose my guests didn’t feel nauseas after your cooking, so maybe it’s safe to start eating the meals you make again.”

A shadow of intense satisfaction crossed Sebastian’s face and he smiled sharply.

“Does it mean that I have your permission to stop Bard from destroying the kitchen?” he wondered, and Ciel’s treacherous lips couldn’t fight against a smile of his own.

He didn’t want to lift the punishment yet but having Bard cook for him was too much. He wasn’t sure he could take it for much longer.

“Yes,” he uttered. “Do that.”

Sebastian stared at his smile in a way that was distinctively strange before making a step towards him, and Ciel immediately frowned.

“Was there anything else?”

Sebastian blinked, and the predatory look disappeared from his face.

“I see the meeting has passed successfully,” he said carefully. “You seem to be in a good mood.”

“I am.”

“You’ve determined who the rat is, then?”

Ah. So Sebastian was hoping to be engaged in the investigation, too.

This was not something Ciel was going to allow.

“It doesn’t concern you,” he said evenly. “I trust you to start cooking adequately again. It doesn’t mean that I trust you with anything else. I told you that I will solve this case by myself — do you want me to repeat myself?”
It was almost fascinating, to see how Sebastian’s calmness shattered, replaced by viciousness that Ciel couldn’t even understand properly. Why was being denied participation so offensive to him?

“You won’t be able to apprehend the criminal without my assistance.”

“I don’t need to apprehend him myself. I’ve already solved the riddle and set the trap without your input. The rat will attack me soon and when he does, his identity will be crystal clear.”

“And what do you plan to do during the attack? Protect yourself?” Sebastian’s sneer said everything he thought about this possibility but Ciel remained unmoved.

“I have servants for that,” he noted coldly. “The most important part of the task is already done by me alone. Those who are loyal to me will protect me physically.”

There. This incentive was obvious enough. If Sebastian wanted to prove his loyalty, he had to interfere when the time came. If he allowed his pettiness at being prohibited from more active participation to prevail, then Ciel would make further unsatisfactory conclusions about him.

Sebastian observed him with narrowed eyes, and then a chilling smile touched his lips.

“Of course,” he said. “I wish you the best of luck in this new game.”

Ciel watched him bow and leave, and suspicions stirred in his mind in alarm, sending a shiver of uncertainty down his spine.

It seemed that Sebastian had somehow managed to enter the game. Only Ciel wasn’t sure in what capacity.

***

Grell Sutcliff was the clumsiest fool to ever step into the manor. He was loud, hysterical, and utterly incompetent, to the point where even Bard, Finnie, and Mey-Rin started to look like professionals.

Where in the world his aunt could possibly find this person, Ciel had no idea, but he was too wary to question it. If it happened during some social gathering, he definitely didn’t want to know the details.

He had been willing to change his rather sceptical opinion about Madam Red after yesterday’s meeting but today, he wasn’t so certain. She was particularly shrilly, vulgar, and boisterous, making explicit advances on Lau and even Sebastian. While seeing how Sebastian stilled before acquiring his usual mask of cold politeness could be amusing in other circumstances, this time, Ciel felt insulted, and Madam Red’s senseless excuse only fuelled his anger further.

It was too much. Way too much.

“Is it true that one of your guests was in the smuggling trade?” Lau asked innocently, and Ciel sighed. Why did this man enjoy pretending to be an idiot? As if he didn’t know the answer already.
Ciel had been perfectly clear as to what Lau’s function was supposed to be back in his letter.

“Yes,” he said tiredly. He didn’t have the strength to argue. It was only morning but he was already exhausted because of all this noise.

He couldn’t stand being around other people for so long.

“You should leave the extermination to Rau,” Madam Red advised him, but Ciel barely heard anything after that because at this moment, Lau suddenly approached him, looming, and pressed a hand against the top of his head.

Ciel flinched before he forced himself not to react. Lau had always shown a disturbing penchant for tactility but this was taking it too far. The pressure was strong enough to make him lower his head a bit, and he focused on looking straight ahead, trying to calm himself.

“If it is the Earl’s order,” Lau’s voice became huskier and the pressure got even stronger, “then I shall do the dirty work.”

Ciel had no idea what it meant. Before he could attempt to figure it out, though, his aunt jumped from her seat to grab him into her arms, almost choking him in the process.

“Don’t you dare try to lay a finger on my precious nephew!” she shrieked, and Ciel inhaled sharply. Surely she didn’t imply?...

“Oh, my! There’s no way I’d try to lay a finger on him out here,” Lau assured her, and this… this was enough.

As soon as Ciel was let go, he hastened to move towards the door.

Sebastian had already escaped at some point and he couldn’t help but feel resentful at this fact. Then again, they were technically at war with each other and Sebastian only enjoyed putting him in psychologically stressful situations. Of course he wouldn’t have given Ciel an excuse to leave the company of those idiots, leaving him to fend for himself.

“Young Master?” Sebastian turned his head to him but Ciel ignored him, still overwhelmed and disturbed.

“Too loud,” he murmured. What was his house being turned into? Such level of noise was unacceptable, just as the reasons that caused it. First Madam Red’s shameless behaviour towards Sebastian… after that display, Ciel wasn’t sure he wanted to have her stay at his house, not if she proceeded to make such a fool of herself. Especially so loudly. He could already feel a familiar sensation of a persistent headache gathering right in the middle of his forehead, one that threatened to grow into a full-blown migraine.

Then Lau’s dirty insinuations, the way he touched him… Disgusting. All of this was disgusting. He didn’t want to be a part of any of it.

He sincerely hoped that Lau had been merely talking about work because otherwise… otherwise…

Nausea crawled up, and this time, Sebastian’s cooking had nothing to do with it.

Ciel moved in the direction of his office almost blindly, pressing his hand to his forehead in the hope to neutralise the first licks of pain. Next second, Bard, Mey-Rin, and Finnie stormed right past him, yelling something unintelligibly. Ciel stopped, closing his eyes and just trying to breathe.
He wasn’t sure how long he was standing like this, lost in the dull mist of half-consciousness, when Sebastian’s voice suddenly broke through, plunging him back to reality, anchoring him, giving him ground.

Ciel still jerked from the unexpectedness of it and immediately turned to face him.

“I have prepared an apple and raisin deep pie for you,” Sebastian told him, and his voice sounded soothing. His eyes, on the other hand…

They were narrowed. Callous.

Something was going on.

“It has almost finished baking, so please stay with the other guests,” Sebastian added, just as gently. A part of Ciel longed to give into the calming effect his tone was providing, but his rational side was already on alert.

Sebastian’s expression didn’t change. No matter how sweetly he sounded, he was almost brimming with darkly malicious, smug energy, and Ciel frowned, unsure of what he was missing.

“Bring it to my office,” he ordered. Why would Sebastian even ask him to re-join Madam Red and Lau? He evidently wouldn’t do that, not when he’d just escaped from them.

Sebastian’s smile seemed to grow wider at the response, as if he was pleased with it.

Or maybe Ciel was being too paranoid?

“I’ve had enough socialising,” he explained, softer this time.

He needed to get somewhere quiet, somewhere where he would be able to think. Maybe his headache would abate as well.

Ciel walked into his office, closed the door… and then someone’s hand wrapped around his mouth, cutting off his air supply. Ciel’s eyes widened and he thrashed wildly, attempting to break free.

“Be quiet, you brat,” someone growled. “Where is the key?”

How did this man expect him to answer when he was holding his mouth closed?

A few moments passed and it seemed like this idiot finally realised it as well. He let go, turning him around, and Ciel sneered at him.

An intruder. In his office.

That’s what Sebastian’s strange behaviour was about. He had undoubtedly detected someone’s presence but chose to do nothing. To teach him a lesson, of course, to make him cry out for help, his help.

Well. Ciel hated being predictable.

Let the bastard find him on his own.

“Where is the key?” the man repeated urgently, his eyes wild, as if he honestly expected an answer.

Ciel did the only thing he could. He laughed, and laughed again, derisively this time, when the man’s face contorted in fury.
Then a huge fist collided with his face and the darkness took him.

***

When Ciel came to his senses, he was already bound. Actually, he was bound and chained, as if they were worried about him escaping.

Maybe his reputation preceded him.

His head was moaning with pain and something unpleasantly wet was trickling down his nose — blood? It could be somewhat tolerable if a semi-familiar voice didn’t keep babbling on and on.

“Just how many households have you helped, and how many have you crushed, Ciel Phantomhive?” it inquired, and Ciel finally found the strength to raise his head.

Vanel. Alone.

How utterly disappointing.

“So, it was you, after all,” he concluded. “Azzurro Vanel of the Ferro Family.”

He listened to the arrogant response half-heartedly, carefully studying his surroundings.

He was in a room of some manor, that much was clear. Maybe it was Vanel’s headquarters? Two more men were standing near the door, guarding it, and Ciel almost snorted.

They really did worry that he would be able to escape in such condition. Chain, ropes, Vanel, and two guards. It was flattering, he supposed, albeit entirely ridiculous.

“English people always have tea on their minds,” Vanel commented, approaching, and tension immediately flooded him. It retreated only when Vanel lowered himself to his knees, not towering over him any longer.

“In 68’s Pharmaceutical Affairs Law, even opium is listed as a poison,” Ciel said mechanically. “It is the Queen’s decree, not to allow the spread of drugs or accommodate dealers any further.”

He wasn’t interested in listening to the answer. Vanel would never say anything worthy of consideration — he was a mediocre, self-absorbed worm whose only future entailed getting crushed.

Was Sebastian planning to come after him? If he allowed him to be dragged from the manor, he must be even pettier than Ciel had realised. How much time had passed, anyway?

Vanel suddenly grabbed him by his face, leaning closer, and all thoughts left his mind for a moment, freeing space for all-consuming, blind panic.

No. No, he wasn’t going to succumb to it. He’d been through much worse. He would not let men like Vanel, who enjoyed physical intimidation, reduce him to a panicked, snivelling mass of nerves
Focus. He just had to focus.

“If I am not returned,” Ciel said, pleased with how calm he sounded, “my servant has been ordered
to take the storehouse’s key to the government.” Vanel was still too unbearably close, so Ciel
forced himself to smile. “Sorry,” he added indifferently, “but I have no intention of getting along
with some gutter rat.”

As he’d expected, the insult worked. Vanel recoiled from him and jumped back to his feet, pointing
the gun at his head.

That was much more preferable.

“Don’t underestimate us adults, you little brat!” Vanel yelled, and a cool, calming sense of control
spread through Ciel’s blood again. Now that the revolting touch was removed from his face,
everything sharpened back into clear focus.

“I already have my subordinates lie in wait at your mansion,” Vanel boasted, and Ciel perked up.
So, there were still the intruders at the manor? By now, someone had to notice them. Or maybe his
idiot demon remembered the half-hinted incentive and realised that he was only succeeding in
destroying Ciel’s trust further the longer he waited.

“Where’s the key?” Vanel asked demandingly. “If you don’t spit it out soon, I’ll start offing your
servants one by one.”

This time, Ciel didn’t even have to pretend — his smile was entirely genuine in its condescension.

“It’s so nice when pets do as they’re told,” he drawled. If only Sebastian learned how to actually
obey him instead of choosing to follow only those orders that he personally liked. Had he really not
understood what Ciel told him during their last conversation on this topic? If he wanted to prove
his loyalty, he had to put Ciel’s well-being above any games. But of course, Sebastian ignored the
offer. He would probably move to interfere only when he felt that Ciel was in a mortal danger.
That treacherous, foolish…

Ciel didn’t have time to finish his thought. Vanel’s boot kicked him in the face violently, and the
force of the collision sent Ciel flying. He couldn’t stop himself from gasping in pain. More blood
streamed down his cheekbone and he grimaced, annoyed with himself. The hit wasn’t bad enough
to warrant any verbal reaction. He would have to stay quiet the next time.

For a while, no one bothered him, so Ciel had time to slowly shake off the dull, throbbing pain and
focus on observing the room again. From his position, he couldn’t see what was behind the
window. Was he somewhere in London? Probably not. The ceiling was too high, the room too
wide, which implied that the building could only be someone’s private manor. Vanel wouldn’t risk
setting up such a luxurious headquarters in London, so they must be somewhere in the suburb… or
maybe the northern part of East London? It would make sense. Perfect sense, in fact.

The phone suddenly rang and Ciel turned his head slightly in its direction. Vanel caught his gaze,
grinning.

“Ready to hear how many of your servants are dead?” he asked. Ciel chortled and was treated to
the beautiful sight of Vanel’s face going red with anger.

“Stupid whelp,” he growled. “So sure of yourself. You make me sick.”
He grabbed the phone but before he managed to get even one word out, someone began to talk rapidly. From his position, Ciel couldn’t hear what was said, but Vanel’s reaction was a good indicator.

“Failed?!” he bellowed. “You useless screw-ups! This is why you’re garbage!”

Ciel rolled his eyes and Vanel glared at him.

“Whatever,” he grumbled, calmer this time. “It’s over. Get back here at once.”

Silence. Some noises that Ciel couldn’t identify.

“What’s wrong?” Vanel mocked. “Did you run into a bear in the forest?”

Ah.

A cooling sense of relief blossomed in his chest and Ciel tried to adjust his posture to a more comfortable one.

So Sebastian finally woke up and decided that it’s time for actions. Took him long enough.

His being late didn’t mean anything in terms of the game — Ciel had still set the trap himself and lured the rat into it. He hadn’t denied that he wouldn’t be able to protect himself physically, so the only reason why Sebastian decided to let him be taken was pettiness. A shallow way of revenge for being refused participation.

Not that Ciel was surprised at his priorities. Sebastian was loyal to himself and his hunger. But for someone who got so annoyed at being distrusted, he sure knew how to make the situation even worse.

Loud screams tore through the phone, and no matter how much Sebastian’s chosen course of actions smarted, Ciel still let himself revel in the realisation that right now, somewhere, people who wanted to hurt him were being hurt in return.

Seeing how Vanel began to stutter, he couldn’t hold back a chuckle.

“Looks like the game of fetch is over,” Ciel remarked mockingly.

Maybe it wasn’t very smart. Pure madness engulfed Vanel’s face and he dashed to Ciel’s side, kicking him right in the stomach, knocking all breath out of him. Before Ciel could even blink, he was hit again, this time across his face. Three more violent kicks in the ribs, but this time, he managed to stay silent, biting his lower lip stubbornly.

The world flickered around him, beginning to darken, so he tried to hold on to reality, to listen to what Vanel was doing instead of going with the pain and letting it consume him.

Everything hurt. Breathing was almost impossible, and all Ciel could do was hope that nothing was broken. He wouldn’t be able to cope with another bed imprisonment.

“Hey!” Vanel spat. It sounded like he’d walked back to the table, to the phone. “If you morons don’t respond, I’m going to kill you!”

Even from his place, Ciel could recognise the notes of Sebastian’s voice speaking back. He didn’t hear a word but something in the muffled, barely audible sounds was intensively familiar.

Vanel stayed silent, though his teeth started chattering loudly, while Ciel concentrated on the
noises from the phone. They took a light tilt, meaning that Sebastian was asking a question.

Technically, Ciel could call him right now. Sebastian would be able to come much more quickly than through interrogating Vanel’s men, but…

But it would be too easy. Sebastian had allowed him to be kidnapped. Now he had to perform his duties and actually work on getting him back.

A question sounded again and Vanel let out a whimper. What could Sebastian be asking? Was he not sure whether he’d caught the right men?

Of course. He couldn’t know who the rat was, Ciel saw to that.

Well… he supposed he could let him know that he was on the right track, at least. He didn’t even need to talk for that because Sebastian certainly didn’t deserve it.

“Woof,” he grumbled. There was a short moment of silence and then Sebastian spoke again, softer this time.

Then he was gone.

Vanel stood frozen for some time before suddenly bellowing, “The Phantomhive’s guard dog is on his way here! Guard the walls! Don’t let even a single mouse in! Don’t let anything get through!”

His panic was delicious and if Ciel’s lips didn’t hurt, he would have smirked.

To his disappointment, Vanel regained some semblance of control over himself pretty soon. He walked to him unhurriedly and Ciel stiffened, wondering if he was going to be beaten again. The more prepared he was, the better chances of staying silent he had.

Vanel sat next to him, grabbing him by his hair tightly.

“You think that your one man will be able to come through my guards?” he hissed. “He’ll get his stomach full of bullets the second he steps into my territory.”

Ciel said nothing and Vanel hissed again, sounding even more infuriated.

“I would love nothing more than to cut your face,” he murmured, leaning closer, his lips almost brushing against Ciel’s ear. “But it’d be a waste, wouldn’t it? Even without that storehouse, we have an excellent variety of drugs. Your pretty face will fetch us quite a price and we’ll drug you up well enough to turn you into an obedient little doll.”

Ciel had been prepared for being hit, not for being threatened with… that. A quiet pathetic sound escaped his lips involuntarily as he tried to move away, and Vanel laughed in delight.

“I know just the people who’d be interested in buying you,” he added. “But don’t worry. With the amount of drugs we’ll put in you, you won’t feel a thing with those perverts.”

Panic stole his ability to see or breathe. Only an urgent, desperate want to cry out Sebastian’s name remained, and Ciel growled, jerking in his ropes, trying to turn panic into rage.

How could he be this weak! These were just words, they were meaningless! Vanel wouldn’t be able to act on his threat, Sebastian would come soon. And even if he failed to find this place, Ciel could still call him — he would if absolutely pushed to it. There was nothing to fear, so why was he shaking?
Vanel hummed in contemplation. A wicked grin slowly sailed on his lips, but when he started to move forward, the muted screams from the outside reached them through the windows.

Immediately, a staggering, liberating relief filled Ciel, and he returned to his position on the floor, pressing his cheek against the carpet calmly.

Sebastian was here. Vanel was already trembling again. And Ciel had all time he needed to chase the remains of terror and start controlling himself.

The screams went silent on the street but soon restarted again, this time from within the house. Vanel whimpered and Ciel bared his teeth in a satisfied albeit pained grimace, regretting that he was unable to see his face.

When slow footsteps began to echo down the corridor, they were music to his ears. He waited, not moving, almost shivering with both anticipation and relief.

Finally, the door opened, and Ciel closed his eyes for a moment.

“I have come to collect my Master.” Sebastian sounded perfectly neutral, and Ciel latched onto this calmness, trying to absorb it.

He could hear Vanel snort in disbelief.

“I’m surprised. Here I was wondering what kind of monstrous man would appear, and it’s just a Romeo in a tailcoat?”

Romeo? Oh, that was priceless. Ciel would have laughed if he didn’t want to preserve his dangerously waning strength.

“Who are you?” Vanel asked suspiciously. “You aren’t just any butler, am I right?”

All mirth disappeared, replaced by an urge to bang his head against the floor.

“He just knew what Sebastian’s answer would be.

“No,” Sebastian replied immediately. “I’m one hell of a butler. Just that.”

He had been waiting to say it. Ciel was absolutely sure. Sebastian’s idea of humour was even worse than his concept of loyalty.

“At any rate, I have no intention of going at it with you,” Vanel told him. “See…”

The next second, his fingers tore into Ciel’s hair, yanking him up viciously, and it was so unexpected that Ciel gasped against his will, again. Through his eyelashes, he managed to catch a glimpse of Sebastian. An entirely absurd jab of pleasure rolled through him as he noticed how Sebastian’s face changed and how he nearly reeled back, his eyes losing all traces of amusement.

So he didn’t mind Ciel being hurt at a distance but he disliked seeing him mistreated with his own eyes. What sort of logic was that?

“Did you bring the item?” Vanel asked harshly.

“Yes,” Sebastian reached for the key, a small, inscrutable half-smile on his face. “Right here.”

There was a sudden loud bang. Sebastian staggered, and the moment Ciel saw blood spurting from his head, everything around him disappeared.
“Seba…” a half-choked scream got stuck in his throat when a wave of rationality cooled him, forcefully bringing light back into his world.

Sebastian couldn’t die from human bullets. They had already been through this.

Still, shock and horror were too potent. Ciel shuddered as he watched more bullets being fired, Sebastian falling down with an expression of horrified surprise, and a feeling of loss that crashed into him was unbearable. He tried to breathe in, but his lungs refused to cooperate.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. How many more traps was he going to fall into today? What was wrong with him?

Sebastian was perfectly fine. He was pretending, like he frequently did. There was no danger.

Finally, rationality won, and Ciel schooled his features, staring at the non-corpse grimly. Vanel laughed hysterically, sending a rush of rotten air his way.

“Sorry, Romeo!” he crooned. “Seems like I won this game! The opponent was a master of games, Lord Phantomhive, but I had an ace up my sleeve.”

Did he mean the most predictable decision to hide men with weapons behind the door? What an astonishing ace. Looked like even the Evil Noblemen had no idea how to play properly.

“It seems I’ve damaged the goods a bit but that’s all right,” Vanel reassured him, dragging him by the hair again. More fool breath and another leery look. “I’m sure you’ll fetch a pretty price even in this condition.”

The coldness of a gun slipped underneath his eye-patch playfully and Ciel stared at Vanel, unimpressed. Were they back to his threats to sell him? The shock value had already been lost. This time, Ciel was prepared for whatever filth escaped Vanel’s mouth, and dealing with it when Sebastian was here was much easier.

Vanel must have misinterpreted his gaze because he puffed up with pride.

“Don’t worry,” he murmured condescendingly, tapping the gun against his chin. “You don’t have to be afraid. By the time you get completely messed up…”

Ciel had no desire to hear the details of whatever scenario Vanel’s sick mind conjured up. Knowing his plans was revolting enough.

“Hey,” he said lowly. Sebastian didn’t even let go of the key to keep up the appearances, the moron. “How long do you intend to play around? How much longer are you planning to pretend to sleep there?”

“Oh well,” Sebastian moved his hand lazily and Vanel spluttered.

“Th—That’s impossible!” he cried out.

“Modern guns really have improved,” Sebastian noted, stretching, and Ciel rolled his eyes in mild irritation. Show-off.

He couldn’t deny it, though, hearing Vanel’s incredulous whimpers was satisfying. Watching Sebastian smoothly kill the rest of his men even more so. It finally affected Vanel enough to make him let go of his hair, and Ciel shook his head in distaste. It felt like his very scalp ached after everything it’d been forced to endure today.
“Oh dear,” Sebastian drawled in mock misery. “My clothes are all full of holes.”

“It’s because you were playing around, you idiot,” Ciel commented. If Sebastian had learned how to accept punishment with dignity, they wouldn’t even be here.

“Young Master,” Sebastian finally looked at him. “They don’t appear to have treated you very well.”

The underestimation of this grated on Ciel’s nerves and he glared darkly.

“Don’t come any closer!” Vanel warned, pointing the gun back at Ciel’s temple, but Sebastian ignored him this time. His eyes were fixed on Ciel.

“You look like a caterpillar, both disgusting and splendid at once,” he said, a strange, unfamiliar intonation in his words. “It quite fits your small, weak stature.”

Ciel glared harder. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Had Sebastian not had enough yet?

“I-if you get any closer, I’ll shoot him!” Vanel screamed, and Ciel grimaced.

“Hurry up,” he ordered. “His breath stinks.”

Sebastian, infuriatingly, immediately stopped walking.

“If I get any closer, you’ll be killed,” he uttered innocently, and fury returned full force, scorching Ciel’s already battered body.

“You bastard,” he spat. “Are you trying to break the contract?” Because right now, he was barely stopping himself from doing just that, hastily and vindictively.

“By no means,” Sebastian assured him, bowing his head in the show of respect he clearly didn’t feel. “I am your loyal servant, after all.”

He was toying with him. Still. As if what had happened wasn’t enough, as if his betrayal was nothing more but a game.

For him, it probably was.

Rage sizzled, licking his every nerve ending, and Ciel had to take a deep breath to calm down.

Vanel’s yells didn’t help him find a balance against the mounting anger.

Sebastian, as if sensing that Ciel was close to exploding, leaned forward with a smile.

“Young Master,” he murmured, “you know what you have to do. Just say the words.”

Oh, so that was how he was going to play it? Did he want to feel needed so badly that he insisted on Ciel acknowledging it aloud?

Fine. But if he thought this would change anything, he was delusional.

“This is an order!” Ciel growled, finally opening his marked eye. “Save me this instant!”

“Shut up!” Vanel shrieked. Ciel tensed, sensing that the man was on the breaking point already, and then the gunshot went off, the sound tearing right into Ciel’s ears, deafening him for a moment.
The annoying ringing filled his head right after that, and Ciel slowly turned to send a long, cold look to Vanel.

Sebastian moved quickly, he had to give him that. To catch a bullet like this… Ciel’s mind couldn’t even begin to comprehend with what kind of speed he had to act to accomplish that.

“Is this what you’re looking for?” Sebastian wondered curiously. A pause stretched, with Vanel probably being too shocked to say anything. “I shall return it to you,” Sebastian decided at last. There was a dull crunch of a bone snapping, followed by Vanel’s agonized screams. Ciel stared at him in dark satisfaction, not looking away even when Sebastian lifted him off the floor carefully. His cheek pressed against Ciel’s head, and if he were anyone else, Ciel would have taken it for a gesture of affection.

Since it was Sebastian, he knew better.

“The game wasn’t all that fun this time.” He tried to say it neutrally but he could hear genuine bewilderment in his own voice.

Ciel’d had quite high hopes for this game. He’d been looking forward to showing that he could solve everything without Sebastian, but while he’d excelled in finding the rat and luring it into a trap, Sebastian’s efforts to prove him wrong ruined all the pleasure. As the result, Ciel was sore, bleeding, covered with bruises, and with several weeks of nightmares ahead, which would undoubtedly come for him after Vanel’s threats.

No, the game wasn’t fun at all. And he blamed Sebastian for it.

“Hey, you! Wait!” Vanel begged hoarsely. “Come and be my bodyguard!”

Sebastian ignored him, too busy with sitting Ciel down and freeing him from the ropes.

“I’m sorry, Mister Vanel,” he said finally, when Vanel continued to babble, “but I have no interest in such materialistic things.” The final constraint fell down and Sebastian straightened, turning to Vanel. “After all… I am one hell of a butler.”

Ciel sighed in resignation and propped his chin on his hand. Really, to repeat the same non-joke twice in less than two minutes? Sebastian was hopeless. How in the world would he be able to make Undertaker laugh?

“Hell?” Vanel mumbled, his eyes widening. Next second, dark feathers swirled around the room, bringing shadows with them, and Ciel’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

Why would Sebastian be angry enough to transform? If anything, he was supposed to be grateful to Vanel for roughing him up. That was why he had allowed his men to kidnap Ciel, wasn’t it?

The shadows multiplied rapidly, climbing up the wall in an unstoppable wave, and soon the room was bathed in the nightfall itself. Ciel watched Vanel unblinkingly, memorizing his terrified expression and the angle under which his hand was bent. He would have to ask Sebastian to do it more slowly next time. It was one thing to break an arm, but to twist it like this? The process had to look interesting.

“Unfortunately for you, this game is over,” Ciel announced coldly. He wanted to go home and rest, but it seemed like Sebastian wasn’t in a hurry. What, did he need an order to kill Vanel, too?

“I will l-leave,” Vanel swore. “I will leave and you’ll never see me again, just… just…”

“Certainly, my lord,” Sebastian began to approach Vanel, circling him playfully. “But first, a little demonstration, if I may?”

“A demonstration of what?”

“What happens to those who let their filthy hands touch what isn’t theirs.”

“I didn’t touch him!” Vanel yelled. “I swear, I didn’t!”

Sebastian hummed, shortening the distance between them but not closing it entirely.

“And what was that about Earl Phantomhive fetching “a pretty price even in this condition”? Did you perhaps intend to sell my Master to someone?”

“I wouldn’t do that!” Vanel protested desperately. “It was just a joke—”

Once again, Ciel didn’t even notice Sebastian move, but Vanel was suddenly screaming. Curious, Ciel leaned forward, trying to figure out what happened. Vanel’s nose seemed to be cut off entirely, with only some bloody, unrecognizable mass left behind.

“You cannot sell something that doesn’t belong to you,” Sebastian tsked, and even though currently, Ciel’s feelings for him were a mixture of rage, bitterness, and resentment, he still stared, fascinated. Sebastian had lost his human form almost entirely. He resembled a winged shadow, seductive and lethal simultaneously, and the deadly energy around him lured Ciel in, made his fingers ache with the need to touch, to see if this energy would destroy or accept him.

Because he was watching so intently, he caught a rapid shadowed blur that was accompanied by Vanel’s shriek.

More blood. Something white protruding from Vanel’s other hand — another bone?

“I shall take your fingers one by one,” Sebastian mused, almost dancing around Vanel. “And after that, one body part for one bruise inflicted upon my Master. Would you consider it fair? Mister Vanel?”

“Please!” Vanel begged. “Please let me go, I won’t—”

More screams. More dull, crunching noises. Ciel watched in half-interest, raising his eyebrow questioningly when Sebastian suddenly slithered to him and bowed, presenting ten torn fingers.

“For you, my lord,” he uttered, and Ciel snorted.

“Wonderful,” he said dryly. “What do you want me to do with them?”

“Whatever you want,” Sebastian grinned. Ciel’s lips twitched in a reluctant answering smile and he nodded vaguely, allowing Sebastian to proceed further. However, the smile faded quickly.

He didn’t want to feel amused. Sebastian’s actions today had proven everything about what he truly felt, again.


But seeing him organise such a show for him, acting so possessively, so protectively… it was muddling the thoughts in Ciel’s head. Maybe this was why he could never stick to his promise to
never let Sebastian close.

Vanel’s screams turned into moans, then to weak whimpers. Finally, he fell silent, and Ciel stretched in his seat sleepily. He was both pleased with the performance, whatever caused it, and bored with it. Yes, it was entertaining, but he would have enjoyed it more if his every cell wasn’t protesting against staying awake so fiercely. If Sebastian wasn’t the one responsible for this.

He wanted to go home.

Sebastian didn’t ask anything, for once. He scooped him up and Ciel pressed his head against his shoulder tiredly.

“Where did you get the key?” he murmured. “Did you even give it to Lau, like I ordered, or was it with you all this time?”

“Technically—” Sebastian started but Ciel interrupted him.

“Of course you didn’t give it to anyone. I gave you a flawed order again, didn’t I?”

Sebastian shrugged, and without looking at him, Ciel knew he was smiling.

More games.

“Take me home,” he commanded.

Sebastian dashed forward and Ciel closed his eyes, soothed by the familiar speed and embrace.

He almost fell asleep, but even through slumbering, he was aware of the hurt that was quietly simmering inside.

He had told Sebastian about what loyalty meant to him. He’d told him and Sebastian still ignored him. Allowed him to be taken just to amuse himself by chasing and retrieving him afterward. And Ciel had played right into his hands.

Sebastian wasn’t loyal to him. When would this finally stop surprising him? Amusement and hunger would always be his main drivers, and his possessiveness and desire to be a perfect butler, the moments of closeness they shared — it all meant nothing in comparison.

He would remember it. This time, he wouldn’t forget.

However, Ciel’s determination lasted for about ten minutes, until they got back to the manor.

“Young Master,” Sebastian called, and when Ciel turned to him, he froze. Sebastian was kneeling, looking sombre and reverent. “I apologise profusely,” he said, and Ciel’s heart accelerated, strangely hopeful. “I have erred in a manner unbefitting a Phantomhive butler. How should I repent?”

Ciel swallowed, and this time, his heart began to pound at a dizzying rate.

Maybe… maybe he was wrong. Maybe they were indeed making some progress. If Sebastian regretted—

“I have not made the preparations for tonight’s dinner in the slightest,” Sebastian finished, and all hopes fell crashing down. Ciel blinked, foolishly astounded by yet another mockery. The events of today piled up, and suddenly, he had a horrible urge to cry.
Shocked and disgusted with himself, Ciel nodded curtly and hurried to the mansion, before Finnie and Mey-Rin, who’d come to greet him, lost all respect for him.

He deserved everything that happened to him today. He deserved more than that. To be so weak-minded, so inferior… constantly forgetting about his promises to himself, being a hostage of his own worthless emotions…

He had to eliminate this pathetic behaviour, to crush it until nothing was left, once and for all. And for this, he would have to keep his distance from Sebastian. This time, for real, without any punishments or games.

Just calm, impersonal distance. Like it should have been from the start.

No more mistakes.
The sky was turning a light, delicate shade of pink when Ciel’s eyes fluttered open. 

For a moment, he lay motionless, studying the intricate silver patterns on the canopy above his bed. His own screams were still echoing in his head, along with a hoarse laughter of Vanel and rough, indifferent touches of Lau who he had been sold to in his dream.

A dream. Just that.

Taking a deep, measured breath, Ciel waited for his heart to calm.

Vanel was an expected visitor. After the events of the previous day, Ciel had no doubts that he would appear in his dreams. But Lau? Lau was new and thus unsettling.

Maybe it was because of his overly tactile behaviour and Madam Red’s opinions. Why were all adults so interested in… that? The mere thought filled Ciel with mind-numbing disgust.

Every time he was kidnapped, he was threatened with it. Every time he met those who were supposed to be loyal to him, such as Lau and Undertaker, he heard hints and dirty insinuations. He had never thought of it before, never allowed himself to wander in that direction, but after Madam Red’s words, Ciel’s mind kept focusing on the men in his life obsessively, recalling their past behaviour, their gazes and words and casual touches, finding reasons for mistrust in every one of them.

Everyone but Sebastian. On the other hand, Sebastian deserved mistrust more than others, just for different reasons.

The thought of him made something tighten painfully in Ciel’s throat and he cleared it hastily, frowning at himself.

Sebastian could go straight to hell. He was a pawn, nothing else, and Ciel would use him as such.

He glanced at the time, calculating whether he should try to sleep some more or start his day already. There were about three more hours before he had to wake up, but something was bothering him, something other than his nightmare...

Right. Vanel’s case and the mess that Sebastian had left behind.

“Sebastian,” Ciel called sharply. His voice was still riddled with sleep but he knew the demon
would hear.

The door opened within seconds, letting Sebastian inside.

“Young Master,” he purred. He was practically radiating smugness and Ciel considered its possible
causes before sighing tiredly.

Of course. Sebastian had correctly guessed that after everything, he would have a nightmare, and
he actually thought that Ciel would be disturbed enough to need his mockery of a comfort. Ciel
wouldn’t be surprised if Sebastian had been waiting somewhere behind the door, anticipating his
crying out impatiently.

Not this time.

“Send a letter to Randall,” he ordered flatly. “Tell him to release the official statement of what
happened in Vanel’s house to the newspapers. Our participation shouldn’t be mentioned — the
underworld will know who killed everyone. That will do.”

Sebastian sent him a strange glance, as if incredulous that Ciel could be thinking of such things in
the middle of the night.

“It will be done,” he said after a pause. “Anything else?”

“No. Start composing the letter right away, I want Randall to take actions first thing in the
morning.”

Sebastian bowed but didn’t leave the room, waiting for something. Without saying a word, Ciel
turned away from him, dragging his blanket up to cover himself.

“Close the door on your way out,” he added.

Sebastian wavered for a few moments. Only then did he finally move, his unhurried footsteps
conveying his perplexed state. The door closed and Ciel relaxed, shutting his eyes. He would learn to deal with his nightmares himself, like tonight, like always. Being alone was
better than sleeping in the presence of the creature that would gladly let him be tortured for the fun
of it.

Misery stirred in his chest, heavy and depressing, but Ciel ignored it. Soon, he managed to fall
asleep.

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“Twining’s Earl Grey with bergamot and mint. It’s a special limited edition, so I thought it would
be to your taste,” Sebastian uttered, placing the tray on the bedside table. Ciel didn’t reply, pushing
closer to the edge of the bed and nodding shortly, indicting he was ready to be dressed.

Sebastian’s touches were cool and gentle as he slipped piece after piece of clothing on him,
accurate and flawless as always. However, he spent a particularly long time on the buttons of his
shirt for some reason, slowing his movements deliberately, and Ciel narrowed his eyes in
annoyance.
Sebastian was clearly set on being absolutely insufferable. He must have caught on—on the distance Ciel was erecting between them already and now he was testing the limits of his patience, establishing the ground of what he must think was a new game.

But there was no game. Ciel was too tired to even ponder over it — he simply needed a break from Sebastian, the longer, the better.

When Sebastian finally finished, he took his cup of tea, breathing in its herbal scent.

It smelled good. It tasted good, too.

Sebastian stared at him, palpably expecting him to say something, and Ciel raised his eyebrow inquiringly.

“Is there anything you want to ask?”

Sebastian blinked.

“No, my lord,” he replied cautiously. His own eyes narrowed in contemplation. “Is the tea to your liking?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions. If it wasn’t to my liking, I would have thrown it into your face already.”

A strange startled half-smile curled up Sebastian’s lips for a second before his face cooled, all traces of mirth leaving it.

“Very well. When you are ready, please come to the dining room. Your breakfast will be served in a minute.”

It was self-evident, but this time, Ciel didn’t comment. Every their morning started the same way, so he wasn’t sure why Sebastian deemed it relevant to say that to him.

He also wasn’t sure why Sebastian hadn’t left yet. Was watching him drink tea that fascinating?

“You can leave,” Ciel snapped finally, when the scrutiny began to bother him, and Sebastian obeyed him wordlessly.

Honestly, must this demon annoy him from the very morning? Hopefully, he would quickly get used to their new, more impersonal routine and stop with his attempts to engage him in conversation.

When Ciel finally got to the dining room, his breakfast was already waiting for him. Sebastian was standing nearby, observing him with inscrutable expression.

Usually, they continued their discussion of plans for the day, which was supposed to start back in Ciel’s room. Now, Ciel chose to eat his meal in silence, trying to ignore Sebastian’s stares and focus on his own thoughts.

He had no active cases going on at the moment. The Queen hadn’t contacted him with any requests, so he could work on new ideas for Funtom. They had more than enough sweets, but the toys section needed to be expanded, Ciel himself had no interest in toys, so determining what others would like was challenging. It was embarrassing to a degree — he felt so removed from the concept of children that he couldn’t even imagine what might appeal to them.
He could always ask Elisabeth but her answers were bound to be predictable. Pretty dolls, pretty trinkets, nothing original. Nothing Ciel wanted to be associated with.

“What would you like for dessert, French cookies or ice cream?” Sebastian’s voice broke into his thoughts and Ciel frowned at the distraction.

“I haven’t finished my breakfast yet. Why are you talking about dessert?”

“I thought—”

“Stop thinking, then, and let me eat in peace!”

And there it was — the tightening of Sebastian’s lips, the reddening of his eyes, the slight darkening of the room.

Sebastian disliked the new routine. Who would have thought?

“Where is Madam Red?” Ciel asked coldly, and the atmosphere warmed somewhat, like Sebastian was pleased with finally being addressed first.

“She hasn’t left her room yet. Madam Red prefers to wake up at the later hours.”

“Fine. Make sure to serve her breakfast when she does wake up. Offer her your company if she has any plans for today.”

This was the best solution. With Sebastian’s need to be in the centre of attention and with Madam Red’s love for the same, they would be busy with each other, leaving Ciel to execute his own plans in blessed silence.

The room darkened again. It was barely noticeable but Ciel knew Sebastian and the effects of his moods too well to miss it.

So Sebastian didn’t want to be in Madam Red’s company. Was he interested in being the centre of Ciel’s attention in particular? Maybe it was somehow connected to their contract.

“As you wish, my lord,” Sebastian’s voice was emotionless.

After that, none of them spoke another word.

***

Once he was finished with breakfast, Ciel hastened to move away from Sebastian’s oppressive attention. The moment he saw Madam Red standing frozen on the stairs, though, a fresh wave of annoyance rolled through him.

Why couldn’t he have finished eating a few minutes earlier? Now he would be stuck in another pointless conversation.

To his surprise, Madam Red didn’t even turn in his direction. She continued to stare at the wall before her.

“Madam?” Ciel asked carefully. “Are you all right?”
“Why did you remove the portrait?”

Hearing her usually cheerful voice devoid of any emotions was unusual. Ciel looked at the wall himself, almost expecting to see the painting of his parents there, and a small, tight knot swelled in his throat when he didn’t.

He’d removed it himself. How could he forget?

The knot temporarily stole his ability to talk, so he stood like a fool for a while, up until self-disgust forcefully washed any semblance of a pathetic obstacle away.

“It was time to take it off,” he said coolly. Madam Red turned to face him, appearing hesitant, as if she couldn’t decide what to feel.

“Why?” she asked quietly.

“Because I’m the head of the Phantomhives now. My predecessor—”

“Your father, Ciel. He is your father, have the decency to acknowledge that!”

Shock at her atypical harshness spread like fire through his body, making his heart sink. Ciel’s hand reached for his chest before he stopped himself, staring at his aunt in disbelief.

“He remains your father,” Madam Red said, much softer this time. “And he remains the head of the house. I know that you try to emulate him but—”

“I’m not trying to emulate anyone!” Ciel hissed. Shock melted, with fury being born in its place. “I am the head of this family. What I achieved, I did it myself. I have my own people and my own rules, and there won’t be a portrait of my predecessor hanging in the central hall for everyone to see!”

Madam Red gasped quietly, closing her mouth with her hand. They stood in uncomfortable silence for what seemed like years, until Madam Red’s loud, fake laughter broke it.

“Don’t mind me, nephew, dear,” she murmured. “I don’t know what I’m talking about. Honestly, it’s so good that I ran into you! I have to ask for a favour.”

Such abrupt change in the mood was jarring, but Ciel managed to collect himself on time and smile just as artificially.

“I’m listening.”

“Listen, Ciel…” Madam Red giggled awkwardly. “Our Grell is completely incompetent. Would it be possible for you to have Sebastian train him as a butler? I’ll give you a big thank you in return!”

Another incompetent person in his manor? And Grell, no less! Ciel’d had more than enough of him in the last few days.

Then again, if he were to become Sebastian’s responsibility… it could actually serve Ciel’s purpose of busying him with something else, to reduce their communication by as much as possible.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll let Sebastian know.”

At least that would be entertaining.
In the next two days, the situation remained stable. Maintaining distance was easy when there was work, and Ciel immersed himself into Funtom’s development entirely. Sebastian kept trying to hover over his shoulder but Ciel dismissed him every time, drawing bitter satisfaction from how bothered he was starting to look.

Ciel was already used to it. Every time he pulled away, Sebastian started to crave closeness, like he was feeding on Ciel’s emotions and disliked being cut off from the source of his food.

This time, though, Ciel wasn’t going to relent. He would keep his promise to himself, and Sebastian… Sebastian could starve, for all he cared. He’d brought it on himself.

Today’s Math lesson was surprisingly interesting. Ciel focused on solving the new task thoroughly, forgetting that he wasn’t alone in the room. His hand was flying over the piece of paper eagerly when Sebastian’s voice intruded upon his thoughts.

“Young Master, I must say that your latest order is proving to be challenging. Your aunt’s servant has already broken more plates than Finnie, Bard, and Mey-Rin have managed to do in a week. If you wish me to train him, I must insist on—”

“Why are you telling me this now?” Ciel snapped in frustration. When he glanced back at the task, he realized he had lost his train of thought and that even his own calculations now looked senseless. Hissing under his breath, he glared at Sebastian. “What’s gotten into you? Why would you interrupt me when I’m doing the task you assigned? You hate when I’m distracted during lessons and yet you’ve just distracted me yourself!”

Sebastian looked lost for a moment, as if he was uncertain about the reasons of his own behaviour. It softened the ire boiling inside Ciel’s chest but it didn’t quell it entirely.

“I would appreciate it if in the future, you focused on fulfilling your direct obligations,” he said icily. “Currently, you are a teacher. Behave as such. I don’t wish to hear about your problems with Grell.”

Sebastian nodded slowly, staring at him with blank expression. His eyes were dark and hooded, and it was impossible to tell what he could be thinking of.

This same fascination with feelings of someone who couldn’t feel a thing had already led Ciel to disaster once. He wasn’t going to repeat it.

Turning away, he focused on his task again, but while nothing was said, he could almost hear Sebastian’s annoyance, could almost taste a strange emotion that would be turmoil in anyone else.

Leave it to this demon to disobey his order even without doing anything to directly distract him. Maybe he was doing it on purpose, putting on a more human façade to pretend he could be bothered by something other than his hunger and his penchant for playing games.

Ciel wouldn’t buy into it. He wouldn’t.
Next morning, there was a suspicious amount of white roses spread all over the house. Ciel examined them wearily, wondering if Sebastian would ever learn from his mistakes. Filling every free space with his favourite flowers hadn’t worked once, why did he insist on doing that every time Ciel attempted to limit their communication? Did he think that by seeing white roses, Ciel would automatically forget about his disloyalty?

Maybe it did work. A little. But certainly not in a way that mattered.

“You have a letter from Lau, my lord,” Sebastian said, offering him the envelope. Ciel accepted it silently, removing the letter from it and studying its content.

Lau was asking him to come see him. Interesting.

“Prepare the coach,” Ciel ordered, his eyes still scanning the letter. “I’m going to London. Ask Finnie to leave what he is doing — he will accompany me.”

The pause that followed was so long that Ciel finally raised his head.

“Is there any particular reason why you are still standing here?” he asked sharply, and frowned when the air practically crackled under the force of Sebastian’s displeasure.

“You would like Finnie to accompany you?”

“That’s what I said.”

An ugly sneer twisted Sebastian’s lips and somehow, it was startling after these days of his fake deference.

Startling and sobering.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Sebastian inquired, contempt and derision heavy in each of his words. “Our servants can defend the house when needed but they are useless as personal bodyguards. Their training is lacking.”

“Their training might be insufficient but their loyalty is in place. If something happens to me, they will try to save me in any way they can. You, on the other hand, will be standing there until my life is in direct danger. I’m sure that you would have gladly watched Vanel sell me to those people he was speaking of, and you would have interfered only if I begged you for it.”

Ciel hadn’t planned on saying this much, but the words had left his mouth as if they wanted to be spoken themselves. He pursed his lips tightly, hoping that his swirling bitterness and hurt wouldn’t break free again, and it was only his pride that stopped him from looking away from Sebastian.

Sebastian… wasn’t reacting in the way he had thought he would. His eyes widened, his lips parted in palpable disbelief, and he stared at Ciel as if he was astonished, unable to believe his accusation.

Was it even real? Or was it another game?

“I would have never let him sell you,” Sebastian said carefully. “It would go against the—”

“You are twisting the contract as you see fit,” Ciel retorted angrily. “Don’t pretend it would have stopped you. You let me be taken from my house. You let me get hurt. You don’t respect our
contract in the slightest, not until it benefits you. And that’s fine. I certainly didn’t expect loyalty from a demon. But I hope I’ve made it clear enough why I’m choosing to take Finnie with me. You…” this time, it was Ciel who sneered at Sebastian contemptuously. “You tire me. I forbid you to even appear in my presence until I call for you. Now go and warn Finnie. I want to leave within half an hour.”

Looking away from Sebastian was a relief. Walking away from him even more so.

When Ciel finally got to his room, his heart was still pounding violently, threatening to break his ribs. Bitterness was circulating through his blood freely, but at the same time, there was relief soothing it with its gentle coolness.

Maybe he needed to say those words. Of course, it would have been better if Sebastian had reacted as he should have, with more carelessness and indifference, but even his reaction wouldn’t take the sense of closure from Ciel. Not entirely, at least.

The most stubborn and weak part of him yearned to believe Sebastian’s astonishment and his attempt at a promise.

It was good that Ciel could easily disregard it.

***

Lau was surprisingly restrained during their meeting — at least towards Ciel. His whole attention seemed focused on Finnie, who was gaping at the smoke-filled den in shock.

Ciel hadn’t wanted to take him inside, but Finnie insisted. He was evidently taking his new task of accompanying his Master seriously and refused to leave Ciel out of sight even for a second.

It was equally annoying and touching, so while irritation stirred in him, Ciel allowed Finnie to follow him.

It was a mistake. Finnie was stunned by the disarray reigning in Lau’s kingdom, and when Lau crept to him, staring at him with his eyes closed, Finnie looked ready to faint.

“You’ve already met Lau,” Ciel said impatiently. “He was staying with us not so long ago.”

“But—” Finnie backed away from Lau, closer to Ciel. “This place isn’t good for breathing, Young Master. Maybe we should leave.”

“Nonsense,” Lau commented lightly, leaning over Finnie with an amused smile on his face. “Earl Phantomhive is my frequent guest, he’s used to my humble dwelling.”

“Leave him alone,” Ciel ordered finally, when Lau continued to advance. Ran-Mao, who had been sitting on Lau’s chair quietly, looked at him suddenly, her expression bored. “You asked me to come. Is there anything you wish to inform me of?”

“Yes, yes. Azzurro Vanel, the member of the Ferro family… I heard that he died recently under the strangest circumstances.” Lau grinned, shark-like, and when Ciel didn’t react, his smirk grew. “Rumour has it that you had something to do with his death. Most people are wary. Some… not so much.”
“What do you mean?” Finnie stepped forward before Ciel could scold him. “There are those who might want to hurt Young Master?”

“Indeed,” Lau crossed his hands across his chest, slowly moving away from both of them. “Ferro family is angry. They are planning. I thought you should know.”

“Thank you,” Ciel said stiffly, glaring at Finnie and silently warning him not to say another word. “However, you could have told me all that in a letter. Why did you ask me to come all the way to London?”

“I sent you a letter?” Lau’s mouth formed a surprised “o”, and Ciel growled quietly, his indignation skyrocketing.

Why did he surround himself with idiots? What a senseless trip! If he didn’t know Lau and his weirdness at this point, he would have thought that he had been lured out deliberately.

“That man didn’t seem so strange when he was our guest,” Finnie murmured anxiously as they walked outside. “Please tell me you never go there alone, Young Master.”

A part of Ciel appreciated this protectiveness but a bigger one was filled with crawling disgust at being coddled so.

“I can handle myself,” he said coolly. Finnie continued to glance at him in unease, biting his lower lip, and Ciel rolled his eyes. “I don’t go there alone,” he relented. “Sebastian usually accompanies me.”

To his surprise, Finnie winced at this response.

“What?” Ciel smirked knowingly. “Do you not enjoy Sebastian as your superior?”

“No,” Finnie shook his head wildly. “I love Mr. Sebastian. He always explains my mistakes and helps me learn how to become better. But he was very strict these last days… We all try to avoid him because he just says very hurtful things whenever he sees us.”

Ciel frowned, wondering what that could be about. He was just turning to Finnie to ask another question when the door of the carriage they were passing opened abruptly and strong hands dragged him inside.

Finnie, to his credit, reacted momentarily, though he was still too slow to do anything. His hands clutched at Ciel’s cane instead and it bent as soon as he touched it. And based on Finnie’s reaction, he didn’t see it coming.

Ciel managed to send him an infuriated glare before the door of the carriage snapped shut and he was plunged into semi-darkness. He didn’t have a chance to turn — someone’s rough hands put a blindfold on him, and the next second, a dry piece of cloth was forcibly pushed into his mouth. The same person tied his hands behind his back and threw him into the seat, clicking his tongue mockingly.

Wonderful. Another kidnapping. And he had ordered Sebastian to stay away from him until he called, which was a bit difficult to do with a gag.

When would he stop giving thoughtless orders?

“What’s him?” a male voice asked dubiously. “He seems to be blind.”
“Just because he wears that patch over one eye doesn’t make him blind, you imbecile! Did you put that blindfold on properly? I don’t want him to even look at us.”

“Come on, that’s too much.”

“Did you see what happened to Azzurro? I don’t trust this boy one bit. Something freaky is happening whenever he’s around. See, he doesn’t even try to fight.”

“Maybe he’s too slow and didn’t realize what’s happening.”

Ciel tried to sigh, already bored with them. Why did such things always happen to him? Sebastian had to know he was in danger but the bastard wouldn’t have moved even in the best circumstances, not to mention when he had Ciel’s foolish order as his excuse.

“Let’s see what he has to say about this,” one of the men said gleefully, and Ciel had to fight against the tension that instantly flooded him.

His ribs were still aching after Vanel. Interesting, would his relatives, or whoever they were, be more original in their methods of torture?

A cold blade touched his face and Ciel jerked from the unexpectedness of it, to the delight of his kidnappers.

“Oh, he reacts all right,” one of them drawled, and the blade pressed harder. “How about we mar his arrogant fa—”

There was a strange noise. The carriage stopped, and then the screams started, terrified and full of agony. Ciel froze as soon as they escalated, unable to believe this was happening yet failing to find another explanation.

This could only be… but no. Why would Sebastian change his pattern of behaviour now?

Who else could be here, though? Ciel certainly didn’t have any other supernatural force on his side. Also, there was something distinctly familiar about the dark presence he could feel with his very essence, one that was currently tearing his enemies to bits.

Slowly, the screams died out. Ciel continued to sit rigidly, still blindfolded, waiting for… he didn’t know what. Just something.

The silence stretched. There was a barely noticeable shift in the air before the gag was removed from his mouth. A ghost of a cool touch brushed against his cheek, and then the door opened once again, Finnie’s loud voice making his ears ache.

“Master!” Before Ciel knew it, his hands were untied and the blindfold was removed. He immediately glanced around the carriage but predictably, there was no one inside. No one but torn, bloody chunks of what had been human bodies just a minute ago.

Finnie’s face was wet with tears but when he looked at the pieces of corpses, there was only wild fury in his eyes.

“Are they all gone?”

“Yes,” Ciel cleared his throat and adjusted his coat. His eyes fell on his cane that Finnie was still clutching, and frozen wonder shattered, giving way to irritation.
“You broke my cane,” he said flatly. Finnie gasped.

“I’m sorry! It was an accident—”

“I know.”

“…and who cares about some cane, anyway? You could be hurt!”

Hearing something this impolite and daring was not what Ciel was accustomed to. His frown deepened and he grimaced, disliking this feeling. Finnie was truly overprotective and overly emotional, it was unbecoming of anyone calling himself a Phantomhive servant.

For some reason, though, Ciel couldn’t find the strength to rebuke him.

“It’s all right,” he said neutrally, measuring his ruined cane with a sour gaze. “Let’s get back to our carriage before anyone notices this.”

Finnie obeyed him without question, wiping his tears off his cheeks.

“I’m glad they are dead,” he murmured. Ciel waited for the inevitable question of who had killed those men, but to his disbelief, Finnie didn’t say another word.

His people were indeed strange. Non-people were strange, too.

Sebastian had saved him. There could be no one else. He saved him despite having a perfect excuse to stay uninvolved for a time.

Why did he do that?

***

At home, Sebastian didn’t come out to greet them, probably still following Ciel’s order. This only created more questions, so Ciel went to his study and rang the bell, unwilling to call him by name.

Sebastian entered soon and Ciel’s eyes immediately bored into him, watching for any trace of smugness.

There was none. Sebastian wore the usual blank mask of politeness that could mean everything and nothing at once.

“Did you instruct Grell for the day?” Ciel asked distantly. Sebastian bowed his head.

“Yes, my lord. I’m not sure how much he will manage to do but I was as detailed with my instructions as possible.”

Ciel leaned against his chair, his thoughts dashing forward.

He was sure that Sebastian had saved him today. There was no other explanation. But why would he hide it? Why would he disappear from the carriage without even saying anything? Was it to technically carry out Ciel’s order? But Ciel wouldn’t have hold his assistance against him in such situation, order or no order, it was absurd!
“Where is Madam Red?” he asked.

“She has retreated to her room. I received no requests from her.”

“Have you started preparing dinner?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Infuriating. What was Sebastian paying at? Did he want to confuse him? Pretend that he was regretful and wanted to make amends? But for that, he would have to admit he was wrong, and Sebastian would never do that. It wasn’t in his nature.

In the end, it was easier to believe that some other force had saved him than to accept the version of Sebastian trying to apologise.

Perhaps there was some third option but Ciel couldn’t figure out what it could be. In any case, he wasn’t going to ask. Sebastian’s action did mean something to him but it wasn’t enough, particularly as Ciel was too wary to really trust it.

“Fine,” he finally looked away. “You can go.”

Sebastian bowed again before moving toward the door. Then he stopped.

“Oh, and I have ordered a new cane for you, Master. It should be ready within the next two days.”

Ciel’s head snapped up just as the door closed.

Had he just…

Damn Sebastian. He always had to make everything even more complicated.

Ciel was officially confused.

***

Whatever Sebastian’s game was, it worked. Ciel found himself inevitably drawn to his presence again, eager to solve the new puzzle. The coldness he had been cultivating so effectively began to melt, and though he clung to the remaining parts of it, his curiosity was gradually winning.

Sebastian noticed, naturally — he had to notice. While he hid his smugness well, Ciel could feel he was pleased with this half-return to their previous state of relationship.

Currently, they were on their way to London, to the workshop where his new cane was supposed to be waiting. Ciel was silent mostly, pondering how he could push Sebastian into discussing what he wanted, but starting that line of conversation would be too obvious. It had to happen naturally if he wanted to get at least some hint into what Sebastian was thinking.

“Is it here?” he asked, eyeing the wooden door.

“Yes,” Sebastian confirmed. “This place is not widely known but I’ve heard that the master is the best in his field.”
“How did you manage to find him? I doubt it was idle research.”

Sebastian sent him a mysterious smile, opening the door and letting him step forward.

If he continued just ignoring his questions, Ciel would never know the truth. Cunning bastard.

A bold man looked up as they entered, his face acquiring a friendly look.

“Welcome, lad!” he uttered, and Ciel immediately disliked him. “Are you here for your father?”

What! The level of presumptuousness…

Ciel narrowed his eyes, itching with desire to say something to put this fool into his place, but Sebastian smoothly interrupted him.

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master behind.

“Finnie’s insane strength is rather tiresome,” he noted casually as they were moving down the street. “Is a cane really something you can just bend by accident? Placing a special order for a new one must be a pain.”

Ciel couldn’t see Sebastian’s face but he distinctly sensed his pleasure at the banter. More warmth poured inside and he closed his eyes for a moment, fighting to keep an even expression.

“Certainly. What a pity to go to all that trouble when you haven’t had a growth spurt in years.”

Now that sounded like the Sebastian he knew. Ciel glared at him, but his glare lacked heat. He was too content for it.

“On top of that,” Sebastian continued, “we have had to add another troublesome servant to our ranks. I’m not sure how well he is going to do on his own, so we should return home at once.”

Returning to normal felt good indeed. Not that Ciel was letting his guard down any time soon, or ever, but…

But it was nice, to think that he could rely on Sebastian, even if it wasn’t true.

The other shoe was going to drop again, he didn’t doubt it. But he still allowed himself to relax.

***

Ciel’s carefully improving mood lasted until they arrived to the manor. It all went downhill from there, and surprisingly, this time, it wasn’t Sebastian’s fault.

“Ciel!” Elisabeth threw herself on him in a whirl of orange fluffiness, and before he could even blink, she was already pressing close, ruffling his hair in the most annoying manner.

“Ciel!” she cried out again. “I missed you so!”

“Elisabeth,” he choked out. This was a nightmare. His manor had been turned into a playground for babies, his servants had been mutilated beyond his comprehension, and Elisabeth’s loud, cheerful voice was an omen of a day filled with revolting sweetness, empty talks, and silly games.

“No!” thankfully, she pulled away, though her hands stayed on his shoulders. “I asked you to call me Lizzy, didn’t I?”

Ciel said nothing, smiling at her tightly. He wasn’t sure what Elisabeth could have read on his face but she suddenly jumped on him again, squeezing him in her embrace.

“You really are the cutest thing ever!” she cooed, and Ciel wanted to die just then and there. He tried to pull away, suddenly uncaring of appearing rude, but at this moment, Sebastian approached, greeting Elisabeth politely, as if she hadn’t added more work for him with her attempts at decoration.

Ciel cared about Elisabeth. She was endlessly dear to him, in ways he couldn’t start to explain. It’s just he liked her best when she was away from him and his house.
Using the fact that Elisabeth now focused on Sebastian, he turned away, trying to compose himself, but he was already struggling with the overdose of ridiculousness.

“Look! It’s so much cuter, isn’t it?” Elisabeth asked joyfully, and Ciel had to take another look at the disaster around him.

Pink. Pink, orange, and yellow everywhere.

Who gave her the right to change everything as she saw fit? Was his word worth nothing at all to her?

When Elisabeth wasn’t looking, Ciel managed to catch how the polite mask fell from Sebastian’s face, changing to unimpressed disbelief.

At least someone shared his opinion.

Elisabeth was waiting for his answer, though, so he tried to focus.

‘It’s ugly,’ Ciel thought morosely. But saying it aloud… no. No matter how Elisabeth irritated him, he wouldn’t fall that low.

“My manor is…” He trailed off, unable to finish this phrase.

Disfigured. Tarnished. Ruined. Sebastian could fix it all in the shortest time possible but not until Elisabeth left, which could take forever.

Had he thought this day was promising? It was terrible.

“There!” Elisabeth announced in triumph, putting a pink hat on Sebastian. “Ah, how cute!”

Any other day, Ciel would have gladly laughed at the stupidity of Sebastian wearing such a silly, inappropriate hat. Now, though, he was too annoyed to feel amused.

“Anyway, Lizzy, why are you here?” he asked, hoping his voice didn’t betray his actual thoughts. “Did Aunt let you come here alone?”

“I wanted to see you, Ciel, so I sneaked out in secret!”

Once again, he was being squeezed in a suffocating embrace, his nose buried in Elisabeth’s warm cheek.

“In secret?” he stammered. “Don’t you think you will get into trouble?”

But reasoning with Elisabeth had never worked. He should have expected that. When she got some idea into her head, she was completely unable to listen to anyone but herself.

“Since the mansion has been decorated so nicely, we should have a ball!”

This time, Ciel couldn’t hold back a disgusted grimace.

A ball. In his house. With Elisabeth and his confused servants who had allowed her to dress them into God knew what.

He wanted for the night to come already.

“And then you can escort your fiancée, and we can dance around in circles. How wonderful!”
Elisabeth began to whirl him around again, probably already imagining them dancing, and Ciel’s initial annoyance and horror began to blend into anger.

Who did Elisabeth think she was? What right did she have to act as if this house belonged to her, as if Ciel was no one important! She would have never dared to act this way with his predecessor, which only meant that she, like Madam Red, didn’t see him as a head of the family. In her eyes, he was just a little boy, the same friend of hers whose biggest problem was being denied access to his favourite toys.

“Hey!” he said sharply, and while he didn’t raise his voice, this time, he didn’t bother to hide his annoyance either. “Who said that it was all right to—”

To his fury, Elisabeth interrupted him again, as if she hadn’t heard a word of his protest.

“Wear the clothes I picked out for you, all right, Ciel? I think they’ll be really cute on you!”

That was it. He wasn’t going to bother with being polite any longer.

“Listen to what you are—” he started to say only to be interrupted once more.

“Oh! I have to do my make-up. Come on,” Elisabeth grabbed Grell and dragged him towards the door. “I’ll make you ever cuter than you already are!”

“A heavy silence fell into the room and Ciel tried to concentrate, to control how he was acting under the force of so many eyes.

All his servants were still here. They were watching him, remembering his behaviour and possibly being ready to mirror it. Ciel absolutely despised Elisabeth at the moment but he couldn’t tarnish her name by disregarding her wishes so publicly.

Clearing his throat, he turned towards Bard, Finnie, and Mey-Rin.

“Make our guest feel welcome,” he uttered coldly. “I’ll be in my office.”

Then he fled, with a treacherous part of him hoping that Sebastian would follow and another one wanting to be left alone.

Ball. Dancing. Elisabeth, who wasn’t used to being denied and whose worst nightmare entailed not looking ‘cute’ enough. On the one hand, Ciel wanted her to maintain her innocence — at least one of them had to stay unchanged. But on the other hand, her childishness filled him with impatience, and her inability to understand his mood at least to some extent, her stubborn blindness and refusal to see him for what he was now were maddening. She was looking at him and seeing the past version of him, ignoring everything that contradicted her naïve views.

Ciel couldn’t imagine having such a carefree and ordinary life. Not anymore. Elisabeth was both a cherished memory of what he’d been once and an uncomfortable reminder of what he’d lost.

He didn’t want to see her. And he didn’t want to take part in her silly plans, especially when she ignored everything he’d tried to tell her.

The problem was… he didn’t know how to refuse her harshly, which was the only way to make her understand. And so he was stuck.
“It would have been easier to agree with her and then subsequently withdraw from the event,” Sebastian remarked lightly after Ciel heaved an umpteenth sigh.

He liked that Sebastian had brought him calming tea and a hastily-made dessert. It seemed like this new version of a caring, protective butler survived Elisabeth’s intrusion, and it was the only pleasing part of the day.

His suggestion was idiotic, though, which could probably be expected from a socially inept demon. Sure, if he let Elisabeth organise a ball and then escaped quietly, she wouldn’t have noticed. Like there were hundreds of other participants who could distract her.

“Can’t you just get her some tea or something and get her out of here?” Ciel asked forlornly. Even the best tea in the world would hardly stop Elisabeth but maybe it was worth a try. “I don’t have the time to keep up with her little girly games,” he added. Dances, clothes, decorations… so very dull, so very meaningless. He wanted nothing to do with it.

“But Lady Elizabeth has invited you to a dance,” Sebastian noted, as if it was supposed to mean anything, and Ciel looked away, feeling a new wave of distress roll through him.

Dancing. There were few things he hated more. Playing musical instruments was engaging, at least, because creating a sound had something almost ethereal about it. But dancing? Balls? Mingling with some women who were of no use to him? Ciel hated losing his time like this. Balls were a chance to make connections and observe, not waste valuable opportunities on moving back and force with a crowd of sweaty, irritating people.

“Young Master…” Sebastian drawled, and Ciel hunched his shoulders, already feeling where this was going.

“What?” he mumbled.

“I have never witnessed it, but I assumed you have a proficiency in dancing. Do you?”

Oh no. Not this conversation. He absolutely refused to waste his time on such trivial matters. Sebastian continued to stare at him in genuine surprise, though, so Ciel hastened to grab the first letter lying on his desk to hide behind it.

“I see,” Sebastian said after a pause, a subtle amusement lightening his words. “So that’s why you are always such a wallflower during social gatherings.”

“I am busy with work,” Ciel uttered darkly, refusing to put the letter down. A wallflower! Why would he ever dance when there was nothing to gain from it? People danced to get a betrothed. He already had a betrothed and he certainly didn’t need another one. “I have no time to be idling with games like—”

Sebastian boldly snatched the letter from his hands, leaving him without the cover, and Ciel stared at him, astonished by such lack of boundaries.

“Pardon my directness,” Sebastian uttered, leaning across the table with such a grave look, one would think he was talking about some unforgivable offense that Ciel had accidentally committed, “but dance balls are quite a regular occurrence, and at events such as banquets and dinner parties, it is an irreplaceable cultural skill to possess.”
Ciel turned away, already sick to his stomach with all the talks about dancing. Worse, he recognised this tone of voice. A teacher one.

This would not end well. Even the attractive dessert Sebastian was holding wasn’t enough to improve his mood and turn it into positive direction.

“…your reputation at social gatherings could be thrown into the gutter,” Sebastian continued to persuade, and Ciel almost growled with annoyance.

“All right, I get it!” he spat. “I’ll do it.” Maybe he could use Sebastian’s advice against him: agree to go along with his plan and then “subsequently withdraw” from the event. “Call me a private tutor or something.”

That didn’t sound persuasive… maybe he could use the names Elisabeth was always throwing around to boast of her skills.

“Lady Bright, Lady Rodkin, or someone like that,” he added, pleased with himself. Now that was convincing enough. These women would hardly agree to take him as their client because their schedule was already full, and even if they did, he would come up with a reliable excuse. Hopefully, Sebastian would forget about this ridiculous idea eventually — Ciel would much rather study Math or even music.

Sebastian opened his pocket watch, pretending to look at it, even though Ciel could clearly see that his eyes were focused somewhere above it.

“There is not enough time to call for the madams,” he said, snapping the watch shut. “With your permission, I shall be your dance instructor.”

Ciel’s jaw dropped from the sheer audacity of such offer. Immediately, his shock grew to fury, and he slammed his fists against the table.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” he cried out. “As if I could dance with a tall man like you!”

How could Sebastian even think of offering such a thing! Many of his ideas were devoid of any sense, but this? Where did he even see two men dancing!

Or maybe that was it. Another thing about human world he knew nothing of.

“Besides,” Ciel continued, calmer now, “you can’t dance anyway.” At the beginning of their contract, Sebastian had been terrible in the role of a human. Certainly his dancing capabilities had to be as limited as his cooking had once been.

Sebastian’s lips curled in an arrogant smile and Ciel felt his horror returning.

No. Sebastian couldn’t know how to dance. He just couldn’t.

“If it is the Vienna Waltz, then leave it all to me,” Sebastian informed him, and Ciel gaped at him, unable to believe this was really happening. “I was a frequent guest at Schönbrunn Palace.”

Sebastian dancing at Schönbrunn Palace. It was located in Austria, wasn’t it? Had he served some Austrian master?

Fascination warred with shock. Ciel was struggling with figuring out which of them should be the dominant emotion when Sebastian offered him his hand, watching him attentively. His lips were still twisted in a small, inscrutable smile, and Ciel’s heart jumped in panic.
“May I have the honour of this dance, my lord?” Sebastian purred.

And that’s when something even more unexpected happened. Ciel’s cheeks flushed, filling with heat, and he found himself at the loss for words, like… like some maiden who had received her first dance invitation.

Horrified, he blinked at Sebastian stupidly, his thoughts racing in an attempt to figure out what to do. Should he accept his hand? Should he ignore it? Should he agree to this crazy idea in the first place or should he throw Sebastian out of his office and order him to never suggest anything like this again?

His brain felt broken. Ciel wasn’t sure how long he spent sitting like this, trying to understand what to do and failing, looking like an utter fool — it could probably go on for hours, but Sebastian finally lost his patience. He stepped forward and took his hand himself, dragging him out of his comfortable chair towards the middle of the room.

“It’s all rather simple,” he assured, and a strange anticipatory note in his voice made Ciel even more horrified. “Since you’re going to be leading a lady, I’ll be taking a female position. Both female and male steps are similar, yet at the same time, a perfect synchrony is required.”

“But there is no music,” Ciel protested weakly, not recognising his own voice, and something malicious flashed in Sebastian’s smile.

“I could call for musicians,” he offered. “We can ask Bard to play some instrument. He is quite good at adapting and perhaps he could be entrusted with something like a piano.”

“No!” Ciel yelled, a new wave of panic overfilling him. None of his servants could witness this humiliating lesson. He’d rather die than see their reactions.

“I thought so,” Sebastian stepped closer, tilting his head thoughtfully. “Then we shall do without music. Let’s begin.”

Ciel stared at him wide-eyed, for the first time feeling this strangely uncomfortable. In every other lesson, he always asked questions to make sure he understood everything, but now, he felt too intimidated to even talk, never mind ask for clarifications.

“The first step is always from the heel,” Sebastian explained casually. Ciel said nothing, continuing to stare at him, and Sebastian took his hand and placed it on his waist. “Hold the lady’s back firmly,” he said, and Ciel shivered, unsure what to do with himself. With pinched expression, he focused on Sebastian’s stomach, refusing to look up and reveal the level of his embarrassment.

“Then, once the melody begins, start from your left foot,” Sebastian put his arm on Ciel’s shoulder and Ciel tensed further, still not daring to raise his head. How did it even come to this? Everything escalated so fast that he had no chance to react appropriately and now he was thrown into one of the most humiliating situations in his life.

“Now…” Sebastian started to move and Ciel hastened to follow, watching Sebastian’s feet and trying to copy his steps. For a few relieving seconds, he forgot about his embarrassment, focusing on his task with all his attention, but in less than ten seconds, his right foot stepped on Sebastian’s, breaking his concentration. Mortified, Ciel stumbled, and his eyes finally flew up to Sebastian’s face, wondering what he would think about such a disgrace. To his absolute stupor, Sebastian continued giving instructions and moving him around, as if Ciel was a pawn in his hands to be moved as he wanted.
Ciel didn’t hear a word of what was being said to him. He kept moving his legs automatically, not even trying to stay in synch with Sebastian at this point, engulfed in a strange, half-conscious state. Then he kicked Sebastian by accident and collided with his midsection, getting plastered against his black jacket.

The world around him stopped and only after a while, Ciel realized that it was only Sebastian who had ceased moving. They stared at each other in silence and Ciel was wary of even imagining how depressed his face must look.

A nightmare. What an utter nightmare. He would never, ever agree to dance with anyone again, especially not with Sebastian.

But Sebastian continued to hold him and for some reason, Ciel didn’t move as well, even though everything within him was curling with shame.

Finally, Sebastian sighed.

“Your natural ability for dancing isn’t so much lacking as it is non-existent, Young Master. You should not just dangle off me.”

Dangle off?!

“It’s your fault for being too tall!” Ciel exclaimed defensively. He went from feeling hot to cold and back to hot so rapidly that he could sense sweat starting to trickle down his face.

Sebastian eyed him sceptically, clearly not believing his excuse. He started to pull away and Ciel’s stupid hand was too slow to understand this. As the result, he cling to Sebastian like some enamored girl until the distance finally broke his hold.

Shock was numbing and Ciel simply stared, knowing Sebastian could read every emotion on his face, with how open and unguarded it had to look.

In the last five minutes, Sebastian had received a whole chest of things he could use against him, but in his current state, Ciel couldn’t even bring himself to care. And anyway, Sebastian seemed too concerned with dancing, as if it were truly a priceless skill to have.

“Above all else, though,” he said, suddenly touching Ciel’s cheek and pulling at it roughly, “you must wipe that sour look off your face. It would be rude to show that to a lady.”

This insulting roughness and crossing of yet another personal boundary finally tore Ciel from his unexplainable state. He remembered Elisabeth, her stupid ball, the reason he had to learn dancing to begin with, and his flustered confusion, miraculously, started to change into much more familiar anger and bitterness.

Sebastian leaned closer to him, his second hand joining his first one, trying to force a smile on his face in the most idiotic way a demon could possibly come up with, and Ciel hit his hands away violently.

“Unhand me!” he barked.

Indulgent mirth had slipped from Sebastian’s face, replaced with confusion of his own.

Good.

“Young Master?” he asked carefully.
This was the most confusing day of his life. Ciel turned away, his fingers reaching to touch his ring for comfort, the events of the day running quickly before his eyes.

“I can’t,” he said harshly. “I…” He wavered. Why would Sebastian try to make him smile? Smiling was a dead science to him. It was possibly even more complicated than dancing, and who could know it better than a demon who had been by his side ever since those changes took place? “I have long forgotten how to smile joyfully,” Ciel finished quietly. It was one thing to pretend to be friendly with strangers who he intended to manipulate, but to pretend like he’s having fun in front of people he cared about? It bordered on being impossible.

On the other hand, Elisabeth would hardly notice the difference. She would be happy with him agreeing to dance with her and she wouldn’t care about the details.

Strange silence from behind made Ciel look back. Sebastian was watching him intently, his eyes red and icy, and a jab of fear startled Ciel out of his melancholy.

He was being weak. He was being too open emotionally. This was not something he could show to Sebastian — how could he forget?

“Why are you standing there?” he demanded coldly. “Did it look like a successful attempt to you?”

Sebastian bowed his head a little.

“No, my lord,” he uttered, and when he looked up again, he was appearing more or less normal. “Let us try again.”

Ciel nodded tensely, returning to his side.

The danger was postponed — again. He had to be more careful.

But the moment Sebastian took his hand, his heart skipped a beat, and he was returned into that intolerable dream-like state where everything seemed perplexing and unfamiliar.

They tried, and tried, and tried, and Ciel’s face felt crimson after hours of blushing. He never failed to stumble, mix the steps, or collide with Sebastian. His head was spinning, his hands sweating, and his thoughts raced in directions so vague that he couldn’t begin to make sense out of them.

“I never thought I would say this, Master, but there appears to be an area where you are truly hopeless at,” Sebastian concluded finally, looking at him half-amused, half-contemplating. “You have memorised the theory but you cannot apply it to practice. Perhaps we should change the positions.”

“What?” Ciel squeaked. “I’m not going to be repeating girl steps! In case you haven’t noticed, I will have to lead Elisabeth, not the other way around!”

“Trying another role might help you feel how the steps should be synchronised,” Sebastian argued. “It won’t hurt as you need all possible solutions there are.”

As Ciel was considering this more than dubious offer, Sebastian touched his waist, pulling him closer, and all his thoughts turned into mash instantly.

Now that he didn’t have to lead, following the steps was indeed much easier. Ciel managed to keep up with eleven turns before his foot slipped and crashed into Sebastian’s, and the uncharacteristic
slowness of his mind didn’t allow him to react on time. He stood for a while, still set on following
the steps, and the consciousness returned only when Sebastian pushed him away lightly.

“That was better,” he praised. He was still holding Ciel’s hand and Ciel stared at it, his head
infuriatingly empty. “You are as ready as possible for the dance with Lady Elisabeth. I’m afraid if
we keep practicing, your legs will give way before you have a chance to invite her.”

Elisabeth.

Yes, Elisabeth. Of course. That was why he was practicing. Three hours of his life wasted on silly
preparations for an evening he already hated with passion.

But somehow, he couldn’t summon the fever of hostility. Ciel had a feeling that these three hours
had shifted something fundamental within him, and he needed time to get back to normal.

“I heard Lady Elisabeth has prepared special clothes for you to wear,” Sebastian said innocently,
and Ciel sighed in defeat.

He wished for the day to end already.

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The clothes Elisabeth had purchased weren’t terrible but they looked girlier than Ciel would prefer.
He stared at his reflection sourly, wondering if he looked acceptable. He didn’t want to ask
Sebastian, so in the end, he decided that he didn’t care. It was for Elisabeth, after all, and no one
but her and the servants would see him.

Ciel went to the hall, calculating how much time he could spend with Elisabeth until it would be all
right to send her home. An hour seemed too short. Three hours were unbearably long, so he was
left with two.

Two hours. And then freedom for a few more months.

The thought soothed him a bit, but as soon as he stepped into the hall, he was annoyed. Elisabeth
was harassing Mey-Rin, blabbering absolute nonsense. Where was she getting this much energy?

“Leave her alone,” he ordered. He tried to look friendly but had a feeling that he didn’t succeed.
Elisabeth, bless her, was oblivious.

“Ciel!” she shrieked. “You look so cute!”

She didn’t even give him a chance before almost knocking him down with the force of her
embrace.

“I really have an eye for this kind of thing!” she announced happily, spinning him around, and Ciel
had a strange thought that if anyone would lead in a dance, it would be Elisabeth.

It was unthinkable, of course, but her endless energy and inability to stand still certainly gave her
an advantage.

“Ciel!” Elisabeth’s mood suddenly darkened and she sent him a disapproving glare. “What about
the ring I prepared for you? There was a cute one that matched your clothes, wasn’t there?”

Oh yes, there was. A bleak copy of the family ring he was wearing. Elisabeth had probably spent a fortune on it when it reality, it was barely worth anything.

“This ring is fine,” Ciel replied shortly. One hour and fifty seven minutes left. He could do that.

“No way! After I went to all the trouble of making everything so cute, to have your ring be the only thing that’s not cute…”

If she said that word one more time…

But she didn’t. Instead, she burst into tears, and Ciel closed his eyes, trying to stay calm and shut Elisabeth’s hysterics off for a moment.

He could do it. Elisabeth had his best interests at heart. It wasn’t her fault that she was such a… girl.

“It’s not that,” he said cordially. Maybe he should go for truth, and Elisabeth would feel sufficiently disturbed by it to back off. “This ring is—”

“Got you!”

Before he could blink, Elisabeth dashed forward, snatching the ring from his finger masterfully and jumping back to her place.

“It’s mine now!” she crowed, and his initial shock at her impossible speed and agility faded. Fury came in its stead, amplified by this crazy day and all confusion it brought.

“Lizzie!” he growled warningly, taking a step towards her.

“It’s too big for you,” she explained, still grinning happily, as if nothing was wrong. “The one I got is just the right size for you, and—”

Too big. Another reminder that some people didn’t consider him a worthy head of the Phantomhives.

“Give it back!” he snapped, finally letting all anger and hostility enter his voice, and a vicious, gleeful joy spread through his chest when he saw how Elisabeth’s eyes flew wide open.

Finally. Finally she woke up from her delusions and saw him for who he was.

“Give that back right now, Elisabeth,” he warned lowly, extending his hand. The servants gasped and a part of Ciel delighted in this, too.

He wasn’t going to let anyone walk over him. He was the head of the house and he wouldn’t play by any other rules but the ones he had set himself.

“Why are you getting so angry?” Elisabeth asked in bewilderment, and Ciel thought this expression was much more pleasant than all her saccharine smiles. “I only… I wanted…”

Ciel narrowed his eyes dangerously, burning her with his gaze. Did she ever hear herself? ‘I wanted, I bought.’ What made her think he was here to fulfil her silly wishes? He had spent three excruciating hours doing the thing he hated, acting like a fool with softened brain who kept blushing miserably and was unable to concentrate. All to dance with her. He even wore the clothes she had picked, and this was what he was getting in return? More requests. More disrespect.
Elisabeth and Madam Red had a lot in common.

“How is it?” Elisabeth’s voice began to tremble, this time genuinely. “I was just trying to make everything cute. So, why are you getting so angry?”

He continued to glare at her, not trusting himself to speak any longer, and Elisabeth’s face scrunched up.

“I hate this ring!” she screamed, and then she sent it flying.

It wasn’t supposed to have any serious impact. Platinum rings didn’t break easily and Elisabeth couldn’t have much of physical strength — a tea cup must be the heaviest thing she ever held in her hands. And yet, the ring crashed into the floor and jumped up again, losing precious bits of platinum on its way. Ciel stared at it, unable to believe his eyes.

The ring of his family. One of the few palpable connections to it, something he could wear without being seen as sentimental. Most importantly, a symbol of his rebirth, the proof that he was the head of the family now and that he deserved this position.

Rage whirled up in him violently, spreading and consuming every bit of him, until every thought of his was tainted with red-hot anger and desire to hurt.

Ciel dashed forwards, raising his hand, his fury hissing gleefully, eager to burst through and attack anyone in the vicinity.

He was anticipating the satisfaction that would well up in him as his palm connected with the cheek of the one that dared to disrespect him so, but someone’s strong grip suddenly stopped him. Ciel turned, almost snarling angrily, and his rage froze the moment he saw attentive red eyes.

Sebastian. What was Sebastian doing—

Oh.

“Young Master,” he said, and even though it sounded neutrally, Ciel quickly recognised a warning in his tone. The red fog in his mind cleared and he realised he was panting heavily, as if after running.

“You have forgotten the cane we went to so much trouble to get.”

Sebastian’s hand snaked around his chest, pressing him closer for a moment, and a surge of cool calmness began to seep through Ciel’s skin, sobering him entirely.

He barely noticed how Sebastian put the cane into his hand.

Elisabeth. He had almost hit Elisabeth. The person he had sworn to protect so long ago. Sweet, naïve, smiling Elisabeth who wanted to share her love for the world with everyone she cared about.

She was crying now, quietly and sincerely, and Ciel’s heart ached at this sight.

What had he done? What would he have done if it wasn’t for Sebastian?

Sebastian… ‘The cane we went to so much trouble to get.’ Ciel had gotten angry at that shop, too, but he managed to hold his anger at bay. Sebastian, on the other hand, defended him, even though he didn’t have to do that.

And now, Sebastian had done even more. He saved Ciel from himself because if he had hit
Elisabeth… everything would be over. His reputation, his attempts to make someone of himself. He could have destroyed it all, and for what? Some ring?

Precious ring. Beloved ring. But just a ring, in the end.

Sebastian was now apologising on his behalf but it wasn’t necessary. Ciel would have to do that by himself.

He walked to the ring determinedly and picked it up, looking at it dispassionately.

A trinket. He had put all importance of being a head of the Phantomhive family into a trinket. The ring was merely a material symbol of his predecessor — keeping it was indeed sentimental. It didn’t define him. He wouldn’t let it.

Ciel stopped next to the window. Hesitation bit into him, a longing for a symbol of his family, but then he remembered Elisabeth wincing, ready to be hit by him, and deliberation vanished.

He threw the ring into the open window and watched it disappear somewhere he would never be able to get it back.

“Ciel, what are you doing?” Elisabeth cried, running after him and peeping into the window, as if hoping to save the ring.

“It doesn’t matter,” he told her dully. “It was nothing but an old ring.”

He walked back towards the stairs and stopped, seeing Sebastian watch him. He stared back.

“Even without it,” Ciel added strongly, “I am the head of the Phantomhive family.”

He wasn’t sure why he was telling Sebastian that, why it felt so important to say that. He saw Sebastian’s eyes widen, and then a smile touched his lips, making his expression almost warm.

Ciel basked in it quietly for a moment before turning to Elisabeth again.

He wanted to go into his room and close himself there. He wanted to mourn the absence of something that was more dear to him than he had expected.

But he was the head of the Phantomhives. And if his predecessor could control himself, so could Ciel.

“How long do you intend to cry for?” he asked, as gently as he could force himself to sound.

“B-but—”

“Your face looks terrible,” he added, just as warmly, so she would understand he was only teasing. “It is absolutely unsuitable for a lady. I wouldn’t want to ask a girl like that to a dance.”

“Ciel…” Elisabeth’s eyes widened hopefully and Ciel smiled at her, even though his lips ached at the effort.

Sebastian chose this second to start playing the violin, and the sound made something in his chest loosen slightly. Grell joined him almost right away. Ciel expected a disaster but to his astonishment, a pleasant, melodic male voice filled the hall.

A perfect atmosphere for dancing. All he had to do now was remember how he had to move.
“It is customary to forget the bad things at an evening ball and dance, is it not?” he asked mischievously, offering Elisabeth his hand as Sebastian had done to him several endless hours ago. “Lady,” he added politely.

He put his hand on Elisabeth’s waist in an already familiar gesture. His feet began to move by themselves, and to Ciel’s astonishment, it was nearly flawless. There was no hesitation, no uncertainty or worry in him: only firm, deadly calmness. Sebastian continued playing without stopping and though Ciel’s heart began to pound from tiredness soon, he forced himself to move, over and over again, smiling a small, fake smile.

Elisabeth deserved to have a good evening. No matter what.

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“I’m sorry, Ciel.” Elisabeth’s eyes were falling close from sleepiness but she gripped his hand tightly, try to stay awake. “I never wanted to hurt you. But you are so sad all the time that I thought… maybe, if I tried to be happy for both of us…”

“Of course,” Ciel said, impatient to get her moving. “Like I said, everything is forgotten. I apologise, too.”

“No!” Elisabeth bit her lip in frustration. “You don’t understand. You think I’m stupid, don’t you? That I don’t understand, don’t see… Ciel, you…. I want you to be happy. And I will do anything to —”

“Lady Elisabeth, we have to go,” Grell’s voice interrupted them. Elisabeth sighed, but when she looked up, there was a new happy smile on her face.

“This was one of the best evenings in my life,” she said softly. “Thank you.”

Ciel murmured something customary, watching her disappear outside.

Letting his mask slip was a relief.

Soon, he was already sitting on his bed, waiting for Sebastian to finish dressing him, and exhaustion danced in every cell of his body, filling it with excruciating weight.

“What a horrible day it has been,” he murmured. He didn’t want to think about it. Not until anger, hurt, and confusion dulled to a bearable extent.

“It seemed as though you were having fun, though,” Sebastian remarked casually.

“Don’t be stupid,” Ciel reached for his ring only to find a bare finger. He flinched, a bitter sensation tightening within him.

How could he forget already? The ring was gone. For good.

“And who is the stupid one?” Sebastian asked. He was calm, but this time, it had an opposite effect on Ciel. A thick knot rose in his throat and he swallowed, trying to hold his emotions back, wanting to scream and rage — or to cry.

He wasn’t going to get upset again. He wasn’t. Not over some ring.

“It’s an important memento to you, is it not?” Sebastian wondered, kneeling in front of him. His
hands wrapped around Ciel’s palm, making his heart swell with unidentifiable emotion. “Yet you’ve put on a façade like that in front of Lady Elizabeth…”

His hands slipped away, caressing Ciel’s fingers lightly, and it took Ciel a moment to see that on his previously empty digit, the ring was now sitting. Complete. Repaired. Without even the slightest scratch.

He gasped, and his emotions suddenly broke through every barrier he had constructed, flooding him until he felt breathless with them. His eyes welled up with tears and he stared at Sebastian, almost shaking with disbelief, incredulous hope, and gratitude.

Sebastian’s lips didn’t really move but Ciel could still see the traces of a strange smile on them.

“It is only natural for a butler of the Phantomhives to be able to do this,” he said softly. He was still holding Ciel’s hands and the moment seemed to stretch, making Ciel’s chest feel even fuller. “This ring is something that exists for the sole purpose of being on your finger. Please take care of it.”

Sebastian let go, and Ciel mourned the loss of the contact.

“True,” he said quietly. “This ring has witnessed the death of its master time and again. My grandfather’s, my father’s…” his voice thickened at the last word, but the emotions he had expected it to bring never came. Sebastian began to remove his eye-patch carefully and Ciel suddenly wondered if he would do the same once the time of their contract came to an end. How would Sebastian kill him? Would it be a long or a slow death? When all masks fell…

“Eventually,” he uttered absentmindedly, “this ring will observe my death.”

Sebastian’s fingers stilled on his face before disappearing, and Ciel closed his eyes, not wanting to see hunger or anticipation in his gaze. This way, in the darkness, he could imagine his own end. He could pretend that their contract meant more than it actually did.

He didn’t know what kept him talking, but he did, the words pouring out, confessing the thoughts he had never allowed himself to dwell upon much.

“This ring has heard the final gasps of the family head again and again. If I close my eyes, I can hear it, too, that heart-wrenching cry. If I threw it away, I would not be able to hear it anymore… That’s what I thought. Stupid, really.” And it was. Obsessing over a symbol of death that remained unchanged with generations. Imagining how it would look on him when his fingers twitched for the last time. Thinking he would lose the last tangible connection to his family by losing this ring, and both dreading and quietly hoping for it.

He wanted to be strong. He didn’t need any morbid symbols of glory and death to prove his position.

But he loved his ring. And he loved his family.

He loved them.

When he dared to look up, he saw Sebastian observing him with detached interest. All softness was gone: now his expression looked hard and dark, as if he couldn’t wait for Ciel to shut up and collect himself.

Sebastian and his hatred of emotions. And yet… he’d done so much for him today. The cane. Dancing. Elisabeth. The ring.
Why would he do all that? None of it was a part of the contract. Sebastian loved seeing him humiliated, he loved devising cruel games and winning them. So why today? Was it truly his attempt at making amends?

Ciel wished he could ask him that, but he’d never get a direct answer. He’d only embarrass himself even more.

He crawled into his bed, silently this time, refusing to part with his ring. This night, it would stay on his finger.

Sebastian covered him with a blanket. Then he moved towards the door, and suddenly seeing him leave felt as incomprehensible as losing the ring.

“Sebastian,” Ciel murmured. “Stay with me. Until I fall asleep.”

There was a short pause and Ciel was grateful again that he couldn’t see Sebastian’s face. He wasn’t sure he would bear watching disgust blossom on it.

They were stuck in an endless loop. Sebastian disliked him putting a distance between them yet the moment Ciel relented, he began to resent his clinginess.

Hopeless. Tomorrow, Ciel would find a balance, but this night, he didn’t care.

“My, my,” Sebastian drawled, mocking amusement in his voice. “Are you showing me your weak side?”

Ciel ignored a dull pang of hurt, burying his face in the pillow harder.

“It’s a simple order,” he uttered. Sebastian’s footsteps began to approach and Ciel closed his eyes, revelling in the sensation of safety it brought.

“I will be by your side no matter where that may be,” Sebastian said, and Ciel drank in his dark promise, basking in it, even knowing what would inevitably follow. “Until the very end,” Sebastian’s whisper was lulling, and soon, Ciel fell into his night dreams, strange and vivid.

There were no horrors this time. Only dancing.

Chapter End Notes

I can't wait to tell some of these events from Sebastian's POV at some future point :D
Hello! I really apologize for such a long delay. Lots of things keep happening and I just hope for a break, honestly. I should have finished this chapter ages ago. Thank you all so much for all your comments and kudos, they always make me breathe easier and fill me with happiness!

In this chapter, the events of Jack the Ripper start happening while Ciel is struggling with his rapidly growing crush on Sebastian without even understanding what it is and why he is feeling all this :D Also, Ciel's self-therapy is sort of fucked up, so some vague references to past torture are present.

When Ciel woke up, he spent some time staring at the ceiling, confused at the delightful warmth that was stirring lazily in his chest.

What had he dreamed about that made him feel so strange? Not particularly happy but not bad, either. It wasn’t a nightmare, then, that much was obvious. But what else could there be?

Sebastian entered his room, carrying the usual tea set, and just like that, Ciel remembered.

Dancing. He’d dreamed about dancing. And he didn’t dance with Elisabeth, which would have been at least somewhat acceptable — no, his partner was Sebastian.

Ugly heat engulfed his face and Ciel lowered his eyes, practically seething with anger and embarrassment.

What was wrong with him? Who dreamed of something like this! Dancing with a demon, of all things — and it felt good. Almost pleasant. Calm and relaxing, with Ciel having no fear that he would make the wrong movement. On the contrary, he felt warm and protected, and the aftereffects had to be still influencing him because even one look at Sebastian made him flush harder.

Sebastian, in turn, looked intrigued.

“Are you feeling all right, Young Master?” he questioned. Ciel said nothing, watching how he placed the tea on the bedside table before reaching to touch his forehead. Ciel recoiled before he could stop himself and Sebastian’s eyebrows began to climb up.

“You look flushed,” he noted curiously. “Perhaps you have a fever?”

“No.” Ciel finally cleared his throat, squaring his shoulders. Best defence lied in the immediate attack. “It’s hot in the room. Did you not ventilate it at all? I asked you to keep the windows open.”

“The night was cold. I was only concerned about your health.” There was a calculating gleam in Sebastian’s eyes now and Ciel positively hated it. If Sebastian had an inkling of what he’d dreamt about, he would be too mortified to ever look at him again.

“Liar,” he scoffed, trying to busy himself with the newspaper. “You forgot. Admit it.”
Even without looking up, Ciel could sense Sebastian’s scrutiny, but he didn’t react to it. He wouldn’t allow himself any visible loss of control, no more than he’d already demonstrated. The day started awfully as it was, all he could do now was not let it turn into something even worse. Whatever crazy dreams had been plaguing him, they were gone.

They would not keep distracting him and Sebastian would never know about their existence.

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Of course, it was easier said than done. Ciel was pretty sure Sebastian had no idea what was bothering him but he did sense that something was amiss. So he made it his goal to be infuriatingly intrusive, approaching him out of the blue to press a cool hand to his forehead, pretending he’s checking his temperature, leaning close when serving his meals and constantly reaching to adjust some piece of Ciel’s clothing.

This was unbearable, and the worst part was that Ciel couldn’t even determine why. He was acting stupidly and clumsily around Sebastian, and while he was moderately certain he managed not to embarrass himself all that much, inwardly, the panic was growing, blossoming into something suffocating and unfamiliar.

He had dropped the fork when Sebastian stepped too closely to pour him more tea during supper. Yes, Ciel masked it by scowling and reprimanding Sebastian for his abruptness, but he knew the actual truth. The spell of clumsiness seemed to activate itself the moment Sebastian was in the proximity.

Maybe he was really coming down with something? Ciel wasn’t sure and he hated it. His thoughts and emotions were all in disarray, which was unacceptable for anyone carrying the name of a Phantomhive. His only hope was that tomorrow, all traces of whatever this misfortune was would be gone.

It took a while to fall asleep, and when the new dream descended, Ciel still found himself unprepared.

There was dancing again but this time, there was nothing calming about it. The room was semi-dark and it had neither doors nor windows. It was a tomb with a high ceiling and Ciel was hopelessly locked inside it. Sebastian was holding him by his waist, whirling him in a perfunctory dance, and Ciel’s feet moved without his agreement, mirroring Sebastian’s steps perfectly.

“Where are we?” he asked. Sebastian didn’t reply but his lips twisted in a predatory, malicious grin that sent shivers down Ciel’s spine.

“Where are we?” he repeated harshly. “Answer me. It’s an order!”

If anything, Sebastian’s grin widened. The lights around them flickered and darkened further, and then a hand in a white glove brushed across Ciel’s cheek in a mocking caress.

“Your orders hold no power over me,” Sebastian drawled. “You are a silly little boy who thinks he can play adult games. I indulge you because it amuses me. I could snap your neck the moment you began to bore me.”

Ciel clenched his jaw, wounded and infuriated all at once.

“Tell me something I don’t already know,” he hissed.
“But that’s the irony of it, isn’t it?” Sebastian’s fingers slipped down his neck and Ciel shivered from cold and from another, stranger feeling. “You know it all and yet you still cling to me. Like a tiny, insignificant, pathetic leech.”

“Shut up!” Ciel tried to pull away, hurt and quiet fury spreading through his blood with the speed that almost surprised him. He knew Sebastian was a monster, of course he did, he never denied it. But still… still…

“Do you want me to tell you a secret?” Sebastian’s lips hovered next to his ear and Ciel nearly trembled, frustration and unexplainable longing clouding his head in the most aggravating way. “You may hate me but you are incapable of living a day without me. If I asked nicely, you would let me consume your soul even without achieving your revenge, wouldn’t you?”

Since there was nothing else he could do, Ciel shrieked from the sheer audacity of it. If Sebastian wasn’t holding him, he would have lashed out physically — he would have torn his tongue out for ever daring to talk to him like this, for implying such disgusting lies.

Sebastian laughed at his helplessness and then Ciel woke up, clenching his sheets in impotent fury, a growl of rage still vibrating somewhere in his throat. It took a few minutes for his heart to calm, and when it did, he jumped from the bed and went to the chess table, staring at the half-completed game unseeingly.

Whatever was happening to him, it couldn’t go on. Sebastian was supposed to be his strength, not his weakness, and these dreams and behaviour were offensive on numerous levels at once.

He needed to regroup. He needed to escape Sebastian’s company — again, only this time, for as many days as it took him to restore his belief in himself. When his mind regained its clarity, he would return.

Calmer already, Ciel took his place on one of the chairs and reached for the knight.

He would win this one. He didn’t doubt it.

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“I’m leaving to one of my family’s estates. I don’t expect my trip to last, so I won’t be needing your company.”

Sebastian stared at him blankly and Ciel glared, daring him to make any undignified comment.

He knew he was running. He was trying to distance himself, and sure, he may have lost count of how many times he had followed this particular scenario by now, but this one would be different. He would get himself under control once and for all.

Liar, his inner voice whispered, and no matter how much Ciel wanted to scoff at it, he knew these words were justified.

Before, every time he had run from Sebastian, he ended up getting closer to him. He tried to put distance between them again and again but went back on his own promises in a stubbornly self-destructive way.
This couldn’t happen now. Not when everything had deteriorated to this disastrous degree, when a rush of completely bewildering feelings crashed into him at random moments. He would leave again but this time, he would come back stronger.

“I’m afraid I won’t be able to let you go alone,” Sebastian said finally, and immediately, Ciel bristled. The echoes of his dream filled his head, sending shudders of revulsion down his spine.

“You won’t tell me what to do,” he hissed. “I make decisions here. You obey them.”

A sneer on Sebastian’s face was both mocking and vexed.

“You cannot spend a day without being attacked or encountering danger,” he drawled. “You have already tried leaving without me accompanying you just recently, Young Master. May I remind you how it ended?”

Sensing a hateful flush crawling up his neck, Ciel grimaced.

“This time, everything will be fine,” he said. “And I’m not going alone. I’m taking Tanaka with me.”

Sebastian’s eyebrow twitched, a tell-tale sign of his genuine annoyance, and Ciel grinned in triumph.

“He used to perform his butler duties flawlessly,” he continued. “Naturally, you surpass him when it comes to physical strength, but other than that, I think you aren’t doing half as well as he did.”

It was a lie, and a pretty obvious one at that, but with how Sebastian’s face tightened, it still affected him.

Good.

“You can leave now,” Ciel said dismissively, waving his hand. “I won’t be needing those mediocre services of yours until my return.”

Now this was downright petty, but Sebastian began to emanate such black fury that Ciel had to fight the impulse to throw his head back and laugh. This demon was so easy to rattle! And such an obtuse being could make him feel so helpless, both in dreams and in reality? It was ridiculous.

“Have I done something to displease you, Master?” Sebastian asked abruptly, and the unexpectedness of it killed off Ciel’s desire to laugh.

“I don’t know,” he said evenly. “Have you?”

Sebastian hissed. The sound was barely audible but it was there, inhuman and frustrated. If Ciel wasn’t so focused on him, attuned to the slightest shifts in his demeanour, he might have missed it, but as it was, a vindictive snarl touched his lips.

Let Sebastian stew in the same frustration Ciel himself was feeling. Let him wonder and try to make sense out of this whole mess, thinking obsessively about their contract, about him, considering different mistakes he could have made and then rejecting each option in his attempts to find an answer to Ciel’s behaviour. If Ciel had to suffer, he sure as hell was taking Sebastian down with him.

The reasons for their discomfort might differ but one truth remained unchanged: this way, they both wouldn’t get any peace. If Sebastian gained a nasty habit of haunting his dreams, Ciel was
going to haunt his reality even when he wasn’t there.

“Get out,” he ordered pleasantly. Red eyes flashed before regaining their blander colour. Sebastian bowed and left, almost slamming the door behind him. Almost, but not quite.

This time, Ciel did laugh, albeit mirthlessly.

The fact that he wasn’t navigating the sea of frustration by himself brought him a semblance of comfort.

Now only if he could get out of this sea without getting wet, everything would be back to normal. Everything would be perfect.

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It was raining. Heavy drops were knocking against his window harshly, the manor was huge and dark, and Ciel felt irrationally, childishly scared.

He had never had to spend the night without Sebastian in the house during the last years. Logically, he understood that nothing could hurt him — he and Tanaka hadn’t been followed, so no one would look for him here even if they wished him harm. Still, panic was devouring his mind bit by bit, slowly turning it into a mess of tangled nerves and anxieties.

The floorboard somewhere behind the door creaked and Ciel gripped his blanket tighter, trying to focus on his breathing.

Everything was fine. No one was here apart from him and Tanaka. He had come here to get rid of his strange dependency on Sebastian, not to make it stronger by wishing for his presence!

The thunder split the sky, and the sound was so loud and sudden that Ciel jumped, his breathing turning from calmed to laboured in a second.

Wonderful. Now he was going to let the nature terrify him. When had he regressed into such a pathetic wreck?

Taking another deep, slow breath, Ciel adjusted his pillow and leaned against it, staring at the ceiling.

He had to think and analyse. Then, after he got his answer and determined what his problem was, he would devise a solution to it.

His emotional state had begun to deteriorate when Vanel abducted him. He was crushed by Sebastian’s betrayal then, and despite his attempts at forming some distance between them, he failed as always.

In fact, Ciel failed in the most spectacular way. Sebastian managed to drag him into another mind game by being surprisingly nice and considerate.

He protected him against his abductors despite having an order to not interfere. He defended his self-esteem by intimidating the cane-maker. He taught him how to dance, he saved his reputation by not letting him hit Elisabeth, and he repaired Ciel’s ring without being asked to do it.
Obviously, all these things messed with Ciel’s mind, tricking his subconscious into viewing Sebastian as some… some… what? An even bigger source of support? A friend? That didn’t explain why he was suddenly feeling so strange in his presence and where all the awkwardness and clumsiness emerged from.

Ciel cursed, rolling himself into a miserable, befuddled ball.

All right, he could skip giving the label to whatever it was he was experiencing. The most important thing was that something changed and he started to require Sebastian’s presence more urgently, to the point where he even dreamed about it.

The second dream was understandable — a saner part of Ciel called him out on his disgusting displays of dependency and mocked his newfound helplessness. But what the hell was the first one about? There was nothing but dancing there! And not in his study room but at the actual ball, with numerous people staring at him and Sebastian with envy.

Another roar of thunder shook the house and Ciel flinched before growling at himself. Putting his head under the pillow, he tried to concentrate again.

It didn’t matter what exactly was making him act this way around Sebastian. It started because Sebastian had showered him with unusually warm attention. So, to get back to normal, all Ciel had to do was convince himself that it meant nothing.

Ignore the good parts. Focus on the bad ones.

Sebastian was a monster who enjoyed playing games. He loved winding Ciel up and watching him buy into the lies he fed him. This wasn’t an exception. Just another trick.

A pang of something unpleasant in response to these thoughts made Ciel flinch before a grim smile settled on his face.

Ah. Here it was. The root of all problems. A desperate desire to still believe that he meant something for Sebastian, something he had suffered from during the first months of their contract. His mind was ready to rebel at the mere idea of this care not being genuine, and it was so disgusting that Ciel would have gladly abandoned his body and refused to return until it woke up from its delusions.

This was somewhat of a recurring problem, and its impact was growing more intense with each time.

Now that he had identified it, Ciel had to understand how to put an end to it. Ignore the good, focus on the bad again? A doubtful method. He needed something stronger.

The wind joined the rain now, and even though the room wasn’t cold, Ciel still shivered.

He fell asleep soon after this, with absolutely zero ideas.

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Tanaka served him breakfast in the morning, watching him with so much worry that for a moment, Ciel felt ashamed for having dragged him here.

“It’s delicious,” he said politely, nodding at his plate. “I have missed your cooking.”
Tanaka let out a soft laugh before shaking his head.

“No need to flatter me, Young Master. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a cook better than your butler.”

His mood instantly soured and Ciel clenched his fork, staring at his eggs darkly.

He hadn’t come up with any solution to his problem. He could almost hear Sebastian’s mocking laughter, promising him failure after failure in his attempts at resistance.

“Young Master?” Tanaka’s voice snapped Ciel out of his thoughts. “Do I have your permission to ask a question?”

“Of course,” Ciel put his fork away, surprised. “What is it?”

“Why did you want me to come with you? I am most appreciative of this honour but it’s been years since you travelled with me. You were a small child when it happened last. I thought for sure you would put your trust into your new servants.”

Ciel would have cut off anyone who dared to question him about his motivations but Tanaka… Tanaka had a special status. And his question made sense. Why had he taken him on this trip indeed? Why not Bard or Finnie, or Mey-Rin?

The answer was startlingly simple, lying just on the surface.

“I think it was for nostalgia purposes.” Ciel tried to keep his actual thoughts inside but the truth was already making its way up, falling from his tongue before he could stop it. “I wanted to remember who I was before.” Before his eleventh birthday. Before Sebastian. Before the burden of such dependency fell on his shoulders.

But maybe he was approaching it from the wrong angle. He shouldn’t have tried to hide from Sebastian and his conflicted feelings in the happy, unburdened past. No, if he wanted to overcome a filthy and unexplainable longing for a demon, he would have to use something equally filthy as his cure.

“The past can never be returned, Master,” Tanaka said quietly. “It’s best not to dwell there.”

Ideally, yes, but his past was the only thing Ciel could use to win this fight against himself, even if he had to do it the hard way.

He’d acted like a child by taking Tanaka with him in some half-conscious hope to relive easier times, to pretend that Sebastian didn’t exist and the problem would disappear if Ciel simply ran. No wonder he hadn’t succeeded. What he needed was hate. Fury. The fuel that had kept him going for so long and that seemed to lose its potency because of Ciel growing soft and mushy, lost in feelings that had nothing to do with his initial goals.

His second dream was truer than he had imagined. He had to get rid of these silly thoughts and feelings by reminding himself what he was fighting for and why.

That night, when Ciel went to bed, the storm began to rage again, but this time, he took no notice of it. Buried under his thick blanket, staring at the ceiling, he forced himself to remember.

He remembered his birthday, how his excited anticipation had turned into fear once he saw his dog
dead, bleeding out on the floor, a fighter till his last second. He remembered the blind terror that gripped him when he noticed his parents, together even in death, his predece— his father holding his mother, as if trying to protect her even now, even after everything was long over.

He remembered Tanaka, kind and strong, trying to help him but getting stabbed in the back. He remembered being grabbed, and hit, and dragged somewhere, crying from horror and pain and indignity. He recalled his whimpers and mindless cries for his parents — how pathetic was that? To cry for someone who you knew was already dead.

Ciel’s heart began to pound in dread from the next memories but he delved into them with a strange, masochistic fervency, holding onto images of every touch, every grunt and stabbing pain that tore his body apart until he barely sensed it.

Vomit threatened to undo his resolve. A bitter liquid rushed through his throat to his mouth and Ciel swallowed it, then did it again and again, until he was almost choking. Thankfully, it retreated eventually, and he went back to the beginning of his memory lane, trying to remember as many details as he could, to savour each degrading and terrifying moment.

At some point, his mind decided to shut down, unable to cope with his indifference towards its signals of distress. Ciel fell asleep, and there was no Sebastian in his dreams, no dancing. His memories entwined, gaining more violent shapes, and Ciel’s voice was hoarse from screaming when he woke up.

His hair was slick with sweat, his body trembling from the aftershocks, but it was meaningless in comparison to the state of his mind.

He was brimming with darkness and revulsion. Flames of rage were licking his insides greedily, fuelling hatred so strong, it was all-consuming, lethal, making him crave revenge with desperation that couldn’t be compared to anything else he ever felt.

Sebastian and Ciel’s strange reactions to him? His embarrassment, his hopes for closeness?

He could laugh from the triviality of it. Had he truly been concerned with all these childish notions just yesterday? Had he really fled just because he felt emotionally compromised?

It was nothing. Nothing. It wasn’t even worth consideration. Ciel would still be more careful now, knowing the possible repercussions of getting too close, but he wasn’t going to let some infantile feelings become an obstacle again. He didn’t need Sebastian as a person, he needed him as a demon.

Everything was all right now. He was himself again, and so he could finally come home.

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When Ciel laid his eyes on Sebastian, something in his chest twitched, but the feeling was muted and faded, nothing like it had been before. Darkness was still circulating in his blood, solidifying his priorities and keeping them in place, so he nodded shortly in acknowledgement. Now that he was in control again, he had no need to annoy Sebastian, at least no more than he would do normally. Time for pettiness had passed.

“Did anything happen while we were away?” he asked, and Sebastian stared at him like he was a
particularly confusing toy that made no sense at all.

“No, my lord,” he replied slowly. “Everything was well. A letter from the Queen arrived, though — it is waiting for you in your study room.”

“Good,” Ciel moved towards the stairs. “I’m going to check it. Prepare something sweet for me to drink.”

Sebastian didn’t react and Ciel fought the impulse to look back to see what kept him silent. Thankfully, he was no longer a blinded, stumbling idiot, so he got to his destination without succumbing to that itch.

His study room looked sparkling clean. Sure, Sebastian had always cleaned everything to perfection, but this time, he had certainly outdone himself. Ciel was reluctantly impressed.

The sight of the letter sent a rush of anticipation through his body, but as he read it, the enthusiasm faded.

Dead prostitutes. Severe mutilations. Unknown killer.

Not that it wasn’t interesting but it also wasn’t the case Ciel would have selected for himself. The choice of victims was everything: it determined who they would have to talk to and on what areas in London the investigation would have to be focused. Prostitutes murdered in such a way probably meant interrogating the worst of the worst.

With a sigh, Ciel pushed the letter away and leaned against the back of his armchair, closing his eyes.

They would have to go to London today, then. At least he was in a proper shape for investigation. But where to start? The details provided in the letter were gruesome but lacking. Nothing specific that would help him identify the areas that had to be covered first.

There was a knock on the door. Without waiting for his answer, Sebastian entered, with a cautious expression but a confident tilt to his lips.

“I have prepared hot white chocolate with Indian salt for you,” he announced, and Ciel blinked.

“With salt?” he repeated. Hot white chocolate was something he had never tasted before, and in theory, it sounded delicious. But salt?

“It balances out the taste of sweetness,” Sebastian placed the tray in front of him, carefully handing him the cup. “Please try it. I hope it will be to your satisfaction.”

Sebastian went out of his way to prepare some unique dishes only when he was trying to make up for something. Had something new happened or was he still at a loss regarding Ciel’s behaviour?

No matter. There was no reason to think of such things.

Taking an experimental sip, Ciel couldn’t help but let out a pleased noise. This was indeed delicious. The taste was so rich and warm that he wanted to lose himself in it for a moment, forgetting about the world at least temporarily.

When he looked up, Ciel almost choked, seeing how intently Sebastian was watching him. His gaze was dark and unfamiliar, and Ciel couldn’t interpret it for the life of him. If he had to take a guess, he would probably think Sebastian was one step from murdering him. Would he look at him
like this at the last moments of their contract?

“I will drink it,” Ciel said stiffly, narrowing his eyes when Sebastian continued to stand motionlessly. What was wrong with him? “You can leave now. I have to take care of some letters and then we will go to London. Make sure everything is ready.”

Something gleeful flashed in Sebastian’s eyes.

“Another case, then?” he asked. Quickly, his look morphed into one of indifference, and Ciel relaxed. This one was familiar.

“Yes. I will tell you the details later, after I decide what we are going to do first.”

“Of course, Master,” Sebastian bowed, sending him an artificial smile. Then he walked out. Ciel waited for the door to close before delving into his delicious drink with renewed enthusiasm, shivering with pleasure at its hot sweetness.

This was the second best thing after revenge that was worth selling his soul for.

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Ciel spent the whole ride to London pondering over the letter and studying its contents shrewdly. It offered nothing but a detailed description of body mutilations and brief mentions of victims. The latest had been killed just yesterday and Scotland Yard was clueless to the point where even the Queen took note.

This was what they would probably do first. Go to Scotland Yard and make sure they had nothing. Extract information if there was any. Ciel really didn’t want to go to the Undertaker, so Randall and his useless dogs it was.

London was overflowing with people. Ciel watched them sourly from the window and when Sebastian finally stopped the carriage, he wrinkled his nose. How could anyone investigate cases when all possible evidence was immediately destroyed by clueless passers-by and careless drivers? And why were there so many of them, anyway?

Maybe it was his imagination, but even as he stepped out on the territory of his London estate, he could almost hear the incessant buzzing coming from the streets.

“London is far too crowded,” Ciel grumbled.

“This is the season when most aristocrats make the move from their countryside manors to their townhouses in London,” Sebastian noted, opening the door before him. Ciel hummed in acknowledgement. Slipping into their usual banter somehow felt natural despite the weirdness of the last several days.

“The season, really?” he asked with a sigh. He’d never paid much attention to the behaviour patterns of high society. It was excruciatingly boring and not worth an effort. “Honestly, it’s like these people have nothing better to do with their time.”

“But it may be a good change of pace for you to get away from the manor at times,” Sebastian remarked. His voice was pleasant but Ciel could sense something crueler underlying it. “Those
four will not be around, so you should be able to live peacefully for a while. Isn't that so?"

‘Those four’? Since when did Sebastian drag Tanaka into his servants-related complaints? And since when was Tanaka anything but peaceful?

Strange. Ciel wasn’t sure what to make of it.

“Peacefully, hm?” he uttered neutrally. Sebastian seemed to respect Tanaka — at least he treated him with particular politeness. What could bring this unusually-worded question on, then? Had Ciel’s decision to leave with Tanaka truly offended him to this extent? Did he want some kind of reassurance that he was still Ciel’s favourite servant?

Probably not. This was completely ridiculous and too disturbingly out of character for him. Then again, Sebastian could be so petulant sometimes, it was almost funny. He clearly hated having to share his meal with anyone else or being seen as anything less but perfect. Not that it made sense but then again, Ciel wasn’t a demon. Who knew what kind of thought processes were happening in their heads?

His dark amusement was shattered the second they opened the door to the room.

It was thrashed, utterly and horrifyingly. Even worse, Madam Red, Lau, and Grell were inside, each focused on their own part of destruction.

The universe must truly hate him. Ciel supposed he could say good-bye to any hopes of having a quiet investigation now.

***

The day that had come so close to being ruined by the unexpected presence of three unwelcome visitors was saved only by its early ending. In less than two hours, Ciel was back at his London house, locked safely in his office, away from each of those loud sources of annoyance.

“You lied about interrogating all people from the list,” he said flatly. Sebastian pressed his hand to his chest in a gesture of fake sadness.

“Do you truly doubt me so much, Young Master?” he sighed theatrically. “By now, I was certain you’ve grown to trust my abilities at interrogation.”

Ciel couldn’t help by snort.

He enjoyed the stunned and awed faces of Madam Red and Grell when they saw Sebastian leave the carriage in his dramatic and reckless fashion, jumping straight out of it, as well as when he demonstrated the seemingly endless list of people whose alibi he’d apparently checked in under half an hour. It was funny, and while Ciel was reluctant to admit it, it was impressive. In his desire to show off, Sebastian brought him excellent results.

However, it was also a lie.

“Even you couldn’t torture the information out of them all in less than fifteen minutes,” he pointed out dryly, and a genuine surprise flashed in Sebastian’s eyes.
“My,” he tsked finally, his voice amused, “you are rather bloodthirsty today, Master. To think that torture is the only way of extracting information from someone…”

“Well, the idea that you actually charmed them to make them talk is even less credible since it would require half a day at the least. I don’t buy it. How did you check them all really?”

Sebastian smirked, so pleased with himself that Ciel rolled his eyes again. How old was Sebastian again? Maybe he was a child by demons’ standards. That would explain his bewildering and exasperating urge to make everyone admire him.

“I checked a few alibis. With the rest, I merely looked at them,” Sebastian confessed at last. “Their souls speak louder than their words ever could. None of them was putrid enough to commit these murders. All bland. Nothing special.”

Technically, this wasn’t about him, but the insult smarted and Ciel stiffened.

“My soul isn’t putrid!” he protested. Or was it? He couldn’t really know. After all, if Sebastian viewed putrid as something special, something opposite to blandness, it meant Ciel’s soul had to be disgusting enough to attract his attention. The word ‘putrid’ in particular made him bristle, though.

Sebastian fell silent, staring at him like he was a puzzle to be solved.

“Of course not,” he said slowly. “I wasn’t talking about you, Young Master, was I?”

Ciel flushed, suddenly embarrassed. Why had he spoken at all?

“You picked my soul out of everyone else’s and deemed it worthy enough to arrange a contract with me,” he muttered. “If the soul has to be putrid to be “special” to you, then obviously mine is. I am not above murder, as you know it, so I imagine your description applies to me as well.”

Sebastian continued to stare at him before suddenly laughing. The sound was so startled, so entertained and genuine that Ciel immediately forgot all about his embarrassment, feeling how biting anger replaced it, heating his blood. He despised being laughed at.

“There is nothing funny here,” he hissed. Thankfully, Sebastian shut up after that, but his eyes were still amused and somehow even more intent.

“Your soul could never be putrid,” he uttered, and a strange, warm ball of energy buried itself in Ciel’s stomach. “Committing a murder and engaging in torture don’t necessarily make the soul desirable to demons. We all have different tastes but in a general sense, for the soul to command attention, it must be light.”

“Light!” This was probably even worse than putrid. “I don’t have a light soul, don’t be ridiculous!” After everything he had done, there was no way he was made of goodness or something equally childish. Lizzy had a light soul. Madam Red had a light soul — not him, never him.

Sebastian lowered his head but Ciel could see a smile stretching the corners of his lips in a weird, trembling way, as if it was done unwillingly.

“You don’t,” he agreed. “Your soul is a mixture of many unique contradictions. No matter how many murders you commit, you will not achieve the level of mindless cruelty and petty depravity that Jack the Ripper or the likes of him have. So don’t concern yourself over it, my lord. You do not have competition.”

Ciel gaped, unable to believe his ears, before an ugly splash of red spread across his cheeks. Worse
than that, an already familiar and dreaded pang of undefinable sensation echoed through him, warning him that he was slipping again.

The Sebastian problem was more prominent and resistant than he had initially believed.

“Yes, well,” he cleared his throat. The topic had to be changed, right now, and his feelings had to be taken under control. “Why do you think Jack the Ripper kills women? Simply to take the uterus of his victims?”

A gleam of new interest lit Sebastian’s eyes.

“You are confident that he is a man, then?” he murmured. Ciel hesitated.

“The violence is excessive,” he said carefully. “I don’t see a woman inflicting it. You yourself told me that Viscount Druitt is our primary suspect. He’s a man. And even if the murderer was a woman, why would she take the uterus?”

“Why would a man take it?” Sebastian countered.

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?” At Sebastian’s intrigued look, Ciel frowned. “It’s done out of perversion. The man must use it for depraved purposes.”

“Depraved?” Sebastian’s face was blank and Ciel nearly growled. Must he spell it out for him?

“Sexual,” he spat in disgust. “This is what men do, don’t they? Uterus must be a part of the sexual act that they want to recreate.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened. Then he turned his back to him unexpectedly and his shoulders began to shake.

“What!” Ciel exclaimed, incensed. “Why are you laughing again?”

Sebastian lingered, and when Ciel was ready to explode, he finally faced him again, mirth still lightening his face.

“Forgive me, Young Master. However, I sincerely doubt this is the reason why the killer takes the uteruses,” he said solemnly. “I would say that the theory of this part being used for dark rituals makes most sense at this point.”

“That’s because you are a demon. You see dark rituals in everything.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You thought dead mice left near the front door was a ritual worth investigation. Turned out you just fattened the local cats until they decided to bring you gifts.”

Sebastian lit up at the reminder.

“I had no idea cats did that at the time,” he argued. Ciel waved his hand dismissively.

“It’s not a ritual. But I agree that the killer must have medical knowledge. Could it be a uterine transplant, then? Is such a thing even possible?”

“I believe so,” Sebastian said very slowly. Ciel narrowed his eyes in response, catching the tiniest tinge of uncertainty in his words.
“You have no idea, do you?” he accused.

“I do. I performed one of such surgeries myself some fifty years ago.”

This sounded even less believable. Ciel continued to stare, analysing each change on Sebastian’s face.

“You’ve just made it up,” he announced finally. Sebastian’s lips twitched and Ciel let out a small laugh. “I thought so,” he added gleefully. “You can’t lie to me about such things.”

“I did perform a similar surgery once,” Sebastian noted. “It just wasn’t what you would call successful.”

Something in the way Sebastian said it made Ciel chuckle again, and for a second, this shared moment of mutual amusement made the room brighter and the air sweeter. The warning bell began to ring in his head almost right away, though, hissing at him to back off, and his smile evaporated.

“Viscount Druitt,” Ciel said coldly. “Check him again, more thoroughly this time. Look at his alibi, not simply his soul, and if he matches the description still, find a way for me to meet him. Is that understood?”

Sebastian reacted to his changed tone: his expression went colder as well as he slipped into a perfect butler persona.

“Yes, my lord,” he said politely. “With your permission, I will start after finishing supper preparations.”

“All right. Let me know if you learn something.”

Reading his words as dismissal they were, Sebastian bowed and left the room. Ciel allowed himself to exhale quietly.

There was no time for distractions. He had to work. Work was everything.

Work was salvation.

***

After Ciel’s self-therapy, he knew he could expect nightmares upon nightmares, vivid and inevitably repetitive. The awakened memories hissed like most vicious of snakes in his mind, eager to bite, hurt, and maim. Ciel didn’t scream this time, though — the return to the real world went smoothly, but even before he opened his eyes, he could tell something was wrong. It was like the darkness had followed him back from his dreams because he could palpably sense it around him, dangerous and suffocating, anticipating his awakening.

He blinked, trying to adjust his vision and figure out what the shapes around him were. As he turned his head, he froze.

A monster was standing near his bed. Abnormally tall, feathered, with grinning sharp fangs and red eyes and—

Oh. This was his monster. But what was Sebastian doing in his room, looking like that? This
seemed like a new demonic form. Ciel didn’t remember seeing it before even though somehow, he could still tell this was Sebastian.

Maybe he was still dreaming? Because usually, Sebastian didn’t make him freeze with fear like this. His darkness had never tasted as something this pungent and vile — it was familiar, yes, but also terrifying.

Ciel closed his eyes, then opened them again. The monster didn’t disappear — it kept standing, its stare fixed on him, hungry and deadly and hateful.

“The faster you run,” it whispered, “the more pleasure I will derive from catching you.”

Ciel sucked the poisoned air in sharply, tightening his grip on the blanket. His heart was beating somewhere in his throat, cold sweat slowly making his night gown wet and unpleasant, and the unexplainable fear was growing, expanding into full-blown panic. But damn if he let himself show it.

“I didn’t allow you to enter my room without permission,” Ciel managed to push out. His voice didn’t tremble as much as he’d feared it would. “Get out.”

The monster stared, and its features were so inhuman that Ciel couldn’t tell what it was thinking at all. Stubbornly, he closed his eyes again, willing the creature before him to melt away, and when he looked the next time, it was gone.

Shaking his head slowly, Ciel pulled the blanket higher and tried to stabilise his breathing.

Had this visit really happened? Or was it a dream, after all, a strange continuation of a nightmare?

He found his calming rhythm soon, and though his heart kept thrashing against his ribcage wildly, Ciel let it lull himself to sleep. He would seek answers tomorrow.

***

Sebastian acted like nothing had happened in the morning. For a while, Ciel watched him, trying to piece together every meaningful detail, but in the end, he was left unsatisfied.

Sebastian could be a good actor when he wanted to. His façade was immaculate and Ciel couldn’t manipulate him into answering his unspoken questions no matter how hard he tried.

“You want me to visit his house?”

“Viscount Druitt is frequently seen in the company of promiscuous young women who he meets at his own parties. Some of them are known to have disappeared.”

“You re-checked his alibi, then? For every case?”

“I did, my lord. He has none.”

“You left only after I went to sleep. Normally, other people sleep at this time, too, and you had to interrogate at least some of them personally. What, did you spend the whole night visiting different houses and waking everyone up, asking them to answer a few questions?”
Sebastian didn’t take the bait, choosing to bypass it again.

“The crowd he interacts with tends to stay awake,” he replied smoothly. “Don’t worry, Young Master. I assure you that the facts I’ve gathered are valid.”

Making any conclusions was impossible when Sebastian was set so firmly against indulging him. Asking him directly would be embarrassing if it turned out that Ciel had indeed dreamt it all.

He had to think logically, then. Why would Sebastian want to intimidate him at night? If his monstrous form had been a reality, not a dream, he was evidently frustrated with Ciel’s behaviour. Yes, technically, that nightmarish version told him he enjoyed the chase, but the whole thing screamed of the opposite.

Whatever the truth was, he wasn’t going to remain unresponsive. If Sebastian was there at night and this was his move, Ciel would make a counter-move. And if he had imagined it… well, then he’d imagined it. No skin off his back.

“I will think about the party,” he said. “And I have another task for you.”

“Of course, Master,” Sebastian said, a small, ambiguous smile on his lips. “What would you like me to do?”

“When we return home, I want you to hire other teachers. I see no point in you continuing to spend time on educating me at this stage. Others can do it just as well.”

That wiped the smile from Sebastian’s face fast.

“Oh?” he asked evenly. “May I ask why you made this decision?”

“Well…” Ciel grinned gleefully. “With how often you complain about our servants, including Tanaka now, you must dedicate more time to household duties. My education should no longer be your concern.”

A whole range of complex emotions changed into one another in Sebastian’s eyes. Ciel managed to identify frustration and astonishment, but to his annoyance, he got lost shortly after that.

Sebastian regrouped quickly. A dangerous, cunning grin crossed his mouth as he bowed.

“It will be done,” he almost purred. “I shall find the best teachers for you, my lord. Would you like me to concoct a convincing disguise for you for the Viscount’s party?”

“No. I’ll take care of it myself.” With how Sebastian had phrased it, he was clearly planning something unsavoury. “Get an invitation for me. That will be all.”

Sebastian didn’t seem bothered with Ciel’s rejection of his offer.

“I will get to it right away,” he promised. Then he dissipated in the thin air, just like the nightly creature had done, and Ciel almost jumped from surprise.

“I told you not to do that!” he yelled angrily. He had no idea if Sebastian could hear him but it didn’t matter. No, what mattered was the reason for this small act of disobedience. Was Sebastian hinting him at something, deliberately creating a parallel between what he’d done at night and now? Or was he merely in the mood to be annoying?

Who could tell.
Exasperated but unable to deny a pang of excitement he felt from this new game with unclear rules, Ciel left the study, walking back to his room. While he wouldn’t let Sebastian come up with a disguise for him, he did have to think of something, and he had to do it quick. Going as himself would be disastrous — Viscount Druitt would recognise his name and he’d grow more reserved and suspicious, regardless of whether he was their killer or just a person with dubious morals.

A strange, muffled sound reached his ears and Ciel stopped, frowning. What was that? It reminded him of…

Crying. Someone was crying.

The sound repeated itself and Ciel stared at the door it was coming from, a vague feeling of horror and embarrassment quickly spreading through his body.

It was Madam Red’s room. And now that he understood it, he could identify the voice as hers as well. But why was she crying? Ciel had never witnessed her doing that before. Why now, in his house, just as he was passing by and couldn’t let himself ignore it?

Reluctantly, he raised his fist and knocked on the door. The crying stopped immediately.

“Come in,” a wary voice replied. Taking a deep breath, Ciel walked inside, cringing as he saw Madam Red’s wet cheeks and reddened eyes.

“Ciel?” she straightened, quickly wiping the tears away. “I thought this was… what are you doing here?”

“I heard you—” Ciel swallowed, unsure if it was polite to say such a thing aloud. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes. Maybe not exactly, but it’s nothing for you to worry about,” Madam Red tried to smile. “It happens sometimes. Being in this house reminds me of your parents so much… too much. I wouldn’t trade these memories for anything but they can be so excruciating that they crush me. I find myself unable to breathe in this house.”

“Well…” Ciel paused, at a loss. What could he say to this? Madam Red had never been emotional about serious things. She enjoyed dresses, parties, and drinks, she rarely displayed any other emotion — in fact, the only two times she did it was when Ciel had just returned after his abduction and recently, when they argued about the portrait.

Why had he come here at all? He should have pretended he didn’t hear anything.

But this wouldn’t feel right either.

He hated these situations.

“Forget about it!” Madam Red exclaimed suddenly, a familiar excited blaze entering her gaze, and Ciel couldn’t hold off a sigh of relief. “Better tell me what Sebastian has found out. Do you have a suspect already? Any progress?”

“Yes.” He’d never think discussing a murderer of prostitutes with his aunt would feel this good. Then again, anything was better than the scene he had witnessed before this. “Viscount Aleistor Chamber. He doesn’t have an alibi and he’s known for his dubious dealings. He’s throwing a party that Sebastian and I are going to attend, but I haven’t decided what disguise I should use. I can’t go as myself, but maybe as someone’s servant? We could hire a prostitute and try to pass her for a naïve, ignorant lady that—”
“Ciel, you shouldn’t speak of such things! Boys your age do not hire prostitutes!”

“It’s for a case!” Ciel snapped defensively. He hated being interrupted. “And what, do you have any other ideas?”

Madam Red grinned as if he had just given her the biggest gift of all.

“Oh, I do,” she drawled. “Trust me, nephew, with what I have in mind, no one is going to recognise you.”

“Tell me, then,” Ciel stepped closer as a light flame of curiosity began to awaken inside him. Madam Red was inventive, it was impossible to deny it, but what could she come up with for this kind of occurrence?

One minute later, he regretted asking.

***

Learning how to walk. How to sit. How to smile. It all was absolutely maddening and Ciel wanted nothing more but to kill Madam Red for suggesting this craziness, to kill Grell for being her servant, Lau for being here, and Sebastian for enjoying it the way he did, the bastard.

“No man is going to approach you if you smile like this, Young Master,” Sebastian sighed, but two small creases at the corners of his lips said it all: he was having fun. “Try again. It’s not that difficult, just repeat after me.” He smiled widely and so artificially that Ciel’s skin crawled.

“If I smile like this, I will look like a harlot,” he hissed, and oh, this did wipe out Sebastian’s grin pretty quick. He stared at Ciel with narrowed, calculating eyes, as if trying to understand whether he was being insulted, and Ciel smirked at him. Let him guess.

“Yes, just like this!” Madam Red shouted suddenly, and Ciel almost fell off his chair. “Do it again!”

“I can’t smile when you want me to!”

“Honestly, what’s so difficult!” his aunt huffed. “Stretch your lips and that’s all. I do it all the time.”

Growling, Ciel obeyed. The resulting silence wasn’t particularly reassuring.

“Young Master, if you could look less murderous, it would be more palatable,” Sebastian commented finally.

“No!” Ciel stood up from the table, glaring at them. “That’s it. Let’s move on to the next point.”

“But Ciel, all ladies must smile at the ball...”

“Then I’ll be the first unsmiling lady! Forget it, I told you I’m not going to waste my time on this again. Now, was there anything else you wanted to teach me? Any more of these useless, worthless rituals that all females must follow for some strange reason?”

Madam Red opened her mouth to reply but Sebastian spoke first.
“I believe we have covered everything sufficiently — apart from smiling, of course, but I suppose some obstacles are destined to be impassable. Now, it is time for dressing.”

Ciel frowned, suspicious at the renewed glint in Sebastian’s eyes. The mere idea of dressing as a woman was distasteful, but with how Sebastian was staring at him, he felt like he was missing something. What could be worse than the dress?

***

The word ‘humiliating’ couldn’t cover it. The word ‘undignified’ didn’t even stand close. In fact, Ciel had no idea how to call the strange and terrible feeling that enveloped his body in a tight, heated lock, breaking his concentration and infecting him with hateful confusion.

When Sebastian told him he was going to put on a corset on him, Ciel didn’t really argue. He expected it to be another part of a dress that they would be done with in a minute. In retrospect, he should have asked more questions, especially after seeing the amused stares Sebastian and Madam Red exchanged.

At first, he simply felt uncomfortable. Madam Red was chattering in the background, Sebastian was arranging the corset with all its endless laces, and Ciel was waiting, half-naked, angry and embarrassed at what he had agreed to. When Madam Red told him about her idea, he was reluctant to accept it, but she looked so excited, a pleasant change after all those tears. Overall, her plan of using him as a bait, albeit in a different form, made sense, too. Ciel said “yes” before properly thinking it over, so now he was paying the price.

When Sebastian started actually putting the corset on, closing it around him and tightening the laces, a strange clot of humiliation, physical discomfort, and heat delved deeply into Ciel’s skin, making it unpleasantly sensitive and almost fervent.

In a strange way, this reminded him of the state he had worked so hard to rid himself of. His efforts had brought the results he needed — his brain stopped getting all mushy, but his body seemed reluctant to follow suit, choosing this horrible moment to suddenly get attuned to the sound of Sebastian’s voice and his impersonal, careful touches.

“That’s too tight,” Ciel complained finally, cringing from how high his voice sounded.

“The corsets are supposed to be tight,” Sebastian retorted, and Ciel shivered before growing angry again. This definitely felt too strange and he definitely didn’t like it.

“Not like this! And why are you tying it from—” Another complaint died on his lips when his brain caught up with it.

Having Sebastian stand behind him when he felt so strangely vulnerable was uncomfortable, but on the other hand, if he were lacing this damn corset and staring at him at the same time… this would be even worse.

The next pull made Ciel gasp.

“Too much!” he wheezed out. “I feel like my insides are about to come out!”

“That is impossible, Young Master. Please, be patient.”
It was easy for him to talk, he wasn’t the one being suffocated!

This was torture. Absolute torture. And goosebumps still ran across his skin every time Sebastian’s fingers brushed against it, which felt even more intolerable because of how perplexing it was.

He already couldn’t breathe and Sebastian showed no signs of stopping. If Madam Red wasn’t here, Ciel would suspect that he was being killed in this rare and deliberately debasing way.

“Sebastian!” he squeaked finally.

“Please hold on for a bit longer,” as always, Sebastian’s voice was falsely soothing. “You'll grow accustomed to it.”

“I said they're coming out!”

“I told you, there's no girl whose insides were pushed out by a corset of all things.”

Ciel gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the groans of his body. Did females really wear this torture device on a daily basis? It was unbelievable.

Could be an interesting way to extract information from someone, though. He would have to look into it later.

Sebastian leaned closer, dealing with yet another row of laces, and his breathe tickled the back of Ciel’s neck. He shivered violently before closing his eyes in embarrassment.

He had achieved such progress. He’d restored his control and it was working pretty well, but Sebastian just had to get even further into his personal space, threatening to undo everything.

No. He wouldn’t let him. Maybe Sebastian was doing it deliberately, maybe not, but in any case, Ciel’s mind was stronger than his rebelling emotional side and his confused body.

“I think that’s tight enough,” Madam Red intervened suddenly, and Ciel would have sighed in relief if he could still inhale. “He looks just like I did when I was his age! Now, let’s try that dress…”

Why had he agreed to this again?

When it was finally time for the party to begin, Ciel was ready to run to Aleistor Chamber and beg him for several private moments together. If Sebastian dared to adjust even one more element of his idiotic outfit, if Madam Red told even one more crude joke, he would explode, and nothing would stop him from sending them all to hell along with their outrageous plan.

He was so exhausted and pissed off that he didn’t even worry about having to force himself to flirt with their suspect. After everything that happened today, after this week in general, almost every other obstacle seemed bearable. That was the only good thing about it.

“Are you truly prepared to do what it takes?” Sebastian asked as they were slowly making their way forward through the brightly-dressed crowd. Ciel kept gazing at his shoes warily, wondering if they were going to crumble under him.

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” was all he said. However his interaction with Chamber went, it wouldn’t be worse than his day with Lyndon, with the way Sebastian had abandoned him then. The
victims of Jack the Ripper weren’t violated, so Chamber’s interest was more practical. It had to be.

“First, we must find the Viscount,” Sebastian announced. Ciel wanted to turn around and glance at him — Sebastian rarely appeared in public in his teacher persona, but the thoughts of his own outfit distracted him.

No one should recognise him when he looked like this. Many faces of the present guests were familiar, yes, but Ciel didn’t have close interactions with them, so it was doubtful that they would figure out who he was. Come to think of it, Elisabeth was the only source of danger, and she wasn’t in London at the moment.

He should have known better than to think that this nightmare would ever end.

“Oh, that dress is so cute!” Elisabeth’s shrilly voice was loud enough to subdue everyone else’s and Ciel froze. Torn between horror and resignation, he turned around and nearly groaned.

Of course. Of course she was here. How could she not be? The entire universe had conspired against him. The only comfort was that Sebastian looked just as unsettled.

“While there is still a chance…” he murmured, wrapping his arm around Ciel’s shoulders, and Ciel nearly stumbled. Was it normal for a teacher to touch his student in such a way? For everyone to see?

“That dress right there is the cutest!” Elisabeth announced even more loudly, and Ciel knew whose dress she meant without even looking.

“Let us head that way,” Sebastian gripped him tighter, dragging him forward insistently. Ciel’s heart was almost breaking out of his chest, his hands shaking from adrenaline. He was always prepared to overcome his irrational fears, to do what was needed to resolve the case, but to risk the name of his family like this? If Elisabeth saw him, she wouldn’t keep quiet. She would start shrieking and drawing everyone’s attention to him.

Why hadn’t he clarified it with Madam Red beforehand? She must have known that Elisabeth was invited. She always knew such trivial things, why hadn’t she told him?

And Sebastian. He appeared truly concerned but Ciel knew he couldn’t trust it one bit. Sebastian was acting strangely from the start of this case and due to his own bewildering state, Ciel temporarily lost the ability to read him. One thing was clear to him: Sebastian was in the middle of his petulant, malicious plotting, and it could result in a variety of different outcomes.

Madam Red’s boisterous laughter was as loud as Elisabeth’s enthusiastic yells, and Ciel cringed when she saw her resting in the armchair, raising her knees in an absolutely indecent manner.

Were all his relatives this embarrassing? They were completely tarnishing their family’s name. At least they weren’t the Phantomhives. Then again, if he was caught in his current state of dress, he would surpass even their level of indignity.

“She’s clearly forgotten herself and is enjoying the party,” Ciel spat. How could any person go from being utterly miserable to laughing like they had no care in this world?

“Oh, there you are!” Elisabeth’s exclamation hit him right in the back and Ciel dashed towards Sebastian without thinking, blinded by his panic of being discovered. Before he could even reach him, Sebastian’s fingers wrapped around his elbow tightly, searing his skin even through the gloves.
“This way, my Lady,” he uttered, and before Ciel could blink, he was being dragged again, his fake hair wavering dangerously, ready to fall from under his stupid pink hat.

If so much wasn’t at stake, Ciel could even enjoy this adventure… maybe. As it was, everything he was doing was disgraceful: first coming here looking like this, then being hunted by Elisabeth; led by Sebastian like a foolish child that was unable to go anywhere by himself without getting lost.

They stopped at the balcony and Ciel tried to catch his breath. Ten minutes into the party and he already felt like collapsing. What a magnificent start.

“Why does this kind of things always have to happen to me?” he groaned. At least his hair was still in place.

“Viscount Druitt looks beautiful as ever this evening!” an unfamiliar voice gushed, and all complaints left Ciel’s head right away. Carefully, he peered back into the ballroom and saw a tall, blond-haired man twirling around with a dreamy expression on his face.

“So that’s the Viscount Druitt,” he concluded. Suddenly, the idea of going up to talk to this man seemed somewhat weird. Wouldn’t he be able to realise that Ciel wasn’t a girl?

But now wasn’t the time to worry about it. They had to act fast.

“Come on,” Ciel stepped forward confidently, knowing that Sebastian would follow. He had a vague idea of what to say to Chamber already. If he made himself look naïve and eager for attention, a guilty man would surely jump at the chance. Would he try to butcher him here, though, or would he attempt to transport him somewhere? That remained to be seen.

Before Ciel could make another step, the musicians suddenly shifted and began to play, the notes of familiar music enveloping the room, encouraging everyone to dance. The guests obeyed happily, leaving Ciel frozen on his place, unsure whether to move backwards or forwards.

“Damn it,” he hissed. “We can’t approach him now.”

“We have no other choice,” Sebastian said, sounding so solemn that Ciel looked up at him in surprise. What choice was he talking about? “Let us join the dance and make our way closer to him in that fashion.”

Ciel’s mind short-circuited. He didn’t have any time to get his thoughts in order because the next moment, Sebastian already took his hand and began to lead him to the middle of the dance floor, without giving him a chance to protest.

“You’re telling me to dance here? With you?” he exclaimed finally. It was impossible, two males couldn’t dance in public, what was Sebastian even thinking!

“At this moment, I am merely your tutor,” Sebastian noted silkily, something dark and mocking swirling in his gaze. “My social position for tonight allows me to dance with my Young Lady publicly. It would only be appropriate.”

Oh. Ciel had completely forgotten about it in his stupor.

“That’s right,” he mumbled, feeling his face slowly reddening.

No, this wasn’t right. Even if he was posing as a girl, he wasn’t actually one. He couldn’t dance with Sebastian like this, in front of everyone — what if his identity was discovered? What would
Madam Red and Lau think? What if Elisabeth jumped to his side the moment the dance ended and revealed his name to everyone?

“Let us begin, my Lady,” Sebastian told him, his lips twisted in a small, closed smile that could mean nothing and everything at once. Then he moved, and Ciel followed automatically, his heart pounding so loudly that it almost overshadowed the music.

The position was all wrong. Sebastian might have shown him how to be led but Ciel was still not used to it and damn it, where did he have to put his hands?

He clung to Sebastian’s shoulder, digging his fingers into it before loosening his grip in panic, knowing his eyes must be wide from shock and embarrassment.

This was just like in his first dream, where he and Sebastian had been dancing at a similar people-filled event. Only the dream was calm and pleasant while the reality was anything but.

When they danced at Ciel’s office during the lesson, Ciel had no one apart from Sebastian to criticise him. Now, he was under the scrutiny of numerous eyes.

Everyone saw him. Everyone saw him dance with a man while dressed like a girl and no one said a word. It didn’t matter that these people had no idea about what was really happening, it was still surreal and Ciel was still lost in the feelings of horror and disbelief. But there was a tiny warm glow of guilty pleasure, too, and this was what absolutely killed him.

“Let’s cut across like so,” Sebastian said quietly. Startled, Ciel looked up and saw that Sebastian was glancing somewhere above his head, tracking threats like Elisabeth or maybe calculating how to best approach their target.

Of course. This wasn’t even a real dance, and just because Ciel was so immersed into it didn’t mean that Sebastian felt the same. He was practical, as always, while Ciel kept messing up and focusing on the emotions no one needed.

Biting his lip, he looked down again, fixing his eyes on his feet. Whatever small delight he had felt now abandoned him, making the whole process of dancing tedious and even more humiliating.

Step to the right. Following Sebastian, then step to the left. Another step to the left.

His nerves were getting the better of him. When the dance finally came to an end and another one started, Ciel was panting heavily. Ignoring all common rules of good manners, he bent over the floor, wheezing, trying to chase away the black dots swimming before his eyes.

“How slovenly of you… and all over a dance?” Sebastian commented with a snort. Ciel glared at him but allowed him to lift himself up. He wasn’t sure he was up for another dance, though, especially since they hadn’t even reached their goal for some reason, but before he could say it, a slow clapping interrupted them. Ciel felt Sebastian tense, the corners of his lips turning down slightly and the proprietary hold on his hand tightening.

“It was a very cute dance, Young Lady,” Aleistor Chamber purred, gazing at Ciel from under his lashes. “You were like a little Japanese robin.”

A Japanese robin? Wasn’t it a bird with a yellow head? How in the world did this man come up with such a comparison? He didn’t have a yellow face, did he? And his dress was certainly not yellow either!

Up close, Aleistor Chamber looked as disgustingly saccharine as he did from afar. How could
anyone find him attractive?

Sebastian got over his displeasure sooner.

“My Lady, I am going to find something for us to drink,” he murmured. Ciel glanced at him, startled, but Sebastian was already moving away, leaving him alone with Chamber.

For a moment, a forlornness brushed against his mind, but Ciel quickly got over it. It was time to complete his task.

“Good evening, Viscount Druitt,” he said, smiling stupidly and making his voice sound higher. He also attempted a curtsy in the way he saw Elisabeth do it, but something definitely felt wrong. He probably botched it completely.

Chamber didn’t seem to mind — if anything, his eyes glowed even more appreciatively. Ugh.

“I wonder if you're enjoying yourself, little robin,” he drawled. As soon as he stepped closer, Ciel tensed involuntarily, but he forced himself to stand still as Chamber took his hand, bringing it to his lips.

In the rare cases when Sebastian did it, it never felt this revolting. And why was he thinking about it anyway?

“I'm very excited to be attending such a wonderful party,” Ciel chirped, carefully extracting his hand and wiping it against the back of his dress. “But I actually wanted to speak with you for a very long time.”

Chamber tilted his head in interest, and the new role finally began to grow on him. Ciel pouted, wrinkling his nose.

“I've grown tired of dancing and eating,” he complained. Something dangerous crossed Chamber’s expression and then he broke into Ciel’s personal space again, his hand moving to wrap itself against his waist.

“What a wilful princess this little robin is,” he whispered, and Ciel had to fight to stay put. Even though he was wearing a dress and a corset, even though Sebastian had just been holding him in a very similar way during the dance, Chamber’s touch poisoned his skin as if he was caressing it directly. “Shall we attend to more entertaining matters?” Chamber added, his hand slipping even lower, and Ciel closed his eyes, willing himself to stay calm.

Endure. He had to endure it. All the degrading things he had done today were leading to this moment. He wouldn’t spoil it. He wasn’t even himself, so there was no reason to worry and let the memories distract him.

“And can you suggest anything more entertaining?” Ciel asked aloud, smiling thinly.

“Of course,” Chamber was becoming bolder by the second. His fingers touched Ciel’s chin and he leaned closer, looking in a way that made Ciel want to punch him. “We could share it together, my adorable little robin.”

He was dead. The moment this was over, Ciel was going to sic Sebastian on him. He’d love to see how Chamber liked being slowly suffocated by a corset. They would have to find a metal one for this, though — did they even exist? No matter, Bard could always assist in making one.

“Whatever could it be?” Ciel cooed. He had to speed things up — the dance was about to end and
Chamber still didn’t seem encouraged enough to lead him away, choosing to babble and stare instead.

Someone else was staring, too. Sebastian?

Almost against his will, Ciel looked in the direction of the gaze, and his heart fell when he saw Elisabeth.

Oh no. This couldn’t be happening.

He blurted out something meaningless, trying to keep an eye on Elisabeth and Chamber both, but his panic was growing quickly, breaking through his concentration.

“It may be a bit early for you,” Chamber said playfully, as if he wasn’t the one to have made his indecent and badly veiled offer earlier.

God. Ciel couldn’t believe he was being forced to say it.

“I am already a lady at full womanhood, I’ll have you know,” he uttered, praying that Sebastian wasn’t nearby and wasn’t listening to him. He would never let him live this down.

The dance ended, and as soon as the last note was played, Elisabeth broke into a run with a wide, excited grin.

No. No, she couldn’t see him! If Ciel had to, he would play catch, and to hell with the looks that would be directed at him.

“What have you been so distracted by for the past few moments, hm?” Chamber didn’t seem annoyed, only interested. Ciel stammered, his brain in panicked disarray, but before his dignity could be destroyed entirely, a loud crash made the whole room quieten.

Sebastian had stolen a carnival mask and a wardrobe somewhere and was now kneeling in front of Elisabeth with a shadowy, dangerous smile on his lips. What crazy thing was he planning? And why would he need a wardrobe, of all things?

“I don’t remember arranging for a magic show,” Chamber murmured uncertainly. Reluctantly, Ciel looked away from Sebastian and focused on his nightmare of an interlocutor again.

“Viscount, I'm tired of magic as well, so...” Ciel hesitated. He couldn’t say that. Not now and not ever, and especially not when he could be heard.

“I got you, my little robin,” Chamber grinned predatorily. “Shall we go?”

Ciel really, really hoped this was their killer. He also hoped he was being led to a butcher chamber, not to a bedroom.

When they left the ballroom, all noises immediately dissipated. The lighting got dimmer and Ciel took it as a good sign. Now, he only hoped Sebastian would find him when the time came instead of choosing to show his magic tricks to the grateful audience, or whatever it was he was doing.

“Was it your teacher you were dancing with?” Chamber inquired innocently. Ciel hesitated, wondering what to reply.

The victims were all prostitutes. If Chamber was planning to make him a new victim, he probably needed to verify his identity and make sure his death didn’t cause a scandal.
“You came as a niece of Angelina Dalles, didn’t you?” Chamber continued when Ciel still didn’t reply. “That’s interesting because I’m quite sure she only has a nephew.”

Oh. Chamber had just given him a perfect idea.

“I knew a man as perceptive as you would see right through this!” Ciel pushed an idiotic giggle out of his throat. “The truth is, Viscount Druitt, I just really wanted to see you. When I heard about your party, I begged my mother to persuade the Baroness to let me come — she is working as a maid in the Dalles manor. We aren’t close, she disapproves of what I do, but she owed me a favour and here I am!”

“Indeed?” Chamber looked delighted. “But what a charming little bird like you could do to cause anyone’s disapproval?”

“Some secrets ought to remain secrets,” Ciel said, a coy grin plastered firmly on his face. “But I’ll give you a hint, Viscount. It has to do with fun.”

“Ah,” Chamber hummed knowingly, a victorious gleam making his violet eyes flash. “No need to say anything else, little robin. I got you. But what about that man you were dancing with? He seemed rather protective of you.”

Protective? Ciel nearly snorted. Right. Sebastian was protective only when it benefitted him.

‘But there were exceptions,’ his mind whispered, and Ciel waved it off. Not now.

“The Baroness asked him to look after me,” he explained. “He’s another employee of hers. I don’t really know him and to be honest, his company was excruciatingly boring.”

Chamber’s smile widened and he abruptly took a turn to the right.

“I hope I will provide you with much more excitement,” he murmured. Ciel giggled again, not wanting to waste his breath on talking.

Whatever reservations Chamber had had, they were clearly gone now. The chances that he was being led to a butcher room increased, and anticipation was already shifting inside him restlessly.

Finally, Chamber opened the door, offering him to go inside first. Carefully, Ciel obeyed, a mixture of familiar tension and adrenaline rushing through his veins. The attack could occur at any moment — he had to watch out so he would have time to call Sebastian.

The room was strange, lit in a dim violet light. And what was this sickeningly sweet smell? Ciel wanted to gag just after one breath. Didn’t Chamber notice it?

A sweet smell… Damn it. He was an idiot.

Unfortunately, the realisation came too late. The world around him tilted on its axis sharply and when Ciel blinked, he was already on the floor, trying to use the door for support awkwardly.

No time to call for Sebastian. No strength, no voice. Would he even have a chance to wake up? Would Sebastian come for him if he didn’t?

The remaining lights got distinguished and Ciel could think no more.

***
His consciousness was returning slowly. The first wholesome image was that of Sebastian, who was looking at him attentively. That’s it, he was just looking, so for a moment, Ciel was confused as to why he was even seeing it. Was it a dream? What purpose did it have?

Then the scene changed and he saw himself, leaning against the wardrobe as Sebastian was putting that hellish corset on him. Only this time, unlike in the real life, no shame or discomfort was present. Instead, Ciel was overcome by a tingling, languid feeling of sweet heat. It kept intensifying, spreading, shrouding every part of him in the mist of fervency that he had never experienced before. A strange and worrisome sensation began to stir in his belly, and Ciel came to his senses with a gasp, the ghost of heat still licking his face gently.

A dream based on the memories… Another one.

How unfortunate.

It felt even more extreme than the one about dancing but at the same time, Ciel was somewhat prepared for it, so it didn’t affect him just as much. As he’d thought, his self-invented therapy kept working, and no matter how stubbornly his treacherous psyche was trying to set him back, he managed to defeat the rebellion and restore the control every time. He would try as much as he needed until these unexplainable dreams became a mere grey memory.

“Next are the long-awaited featured goods of this evening!” a pleased and familiar voice announced. Ciel started, finally remembering about his surroundings.

He couldn’t see anything — a band was covering his eyes and his hands were tied to his neck, a knot rubbing against his wrists painfully.

“He is something that you can appreciate visually or keep as a pet,” Chamber continued. “You could also use it for a ritual.”

It? This man was so dead. Absolutely done for.

Or maybe not. The Queen had expressed the wish for Jack the Ripper to be delivered alive for a possible public execution to be staged, and since all suspects Ciel had investigated tended to end up dead, Chamber would have to be an exception.

A black market auction. An auction where he was being sold, again, like some inanimate object, displayed in front of everyone.

Uneasy memories slithered around his brain, reminding him of their existence, but Ciel forcefully shut them off. After reliving them on purpose for so many times in a row, he felt only mildly distressed. Not to mention that he couldn’t see the potential buyers and he wasn’t who they thought he was.

It was obvious what happened to those prostitutes now. Pity, Ciel had really hoped for something more creative than the useless, unimaginative rituals. Jack the Ripper was as boring as Viscount Druitt’s public persona. No fantasy whatsoever.

“Starting bid is 1000 Guinea!” Chamber exclaimed just as someone finally removed the band from his eyes. Ciel paused, unwilling to open them yet, but annoyance at his weakness quickly surpassed his hesitation. He gazed at the excited, greedy faces dispassionately. Despicable worms. If it wouldn’t look so outrageous to the Queen, Ciel would order Sebastian to kill them off.
“Sebastian,” he said sharply. “I’m here.”

The bastard could have bothered to come by himself, when it became obvious that they were right in their suspicions. But of course, he didn’t move a finger until Ciel called.

A burst of cold wind put out all the candles. A second later, muffled and pained yells began to echo around the room, and Ciel sighed, bored, waiting for it to be over.

Sebastian couldn’t appear normally, he had to stage a show. How had he lucked out and gotten himself the most dramatic demon of all?

The lights went back when all sounds quietened. Sebastian stepped forward, once again in his teacher glasses, gazing at him with an almost annoyed expression. Annoyed! What reason did he have to be annoyed?

“Well, well. Your only function is to get caught repeatedly, isn’t it?” he asked, and Ciel seethed. He had done just what they had agreed upon! Fine, losing consciousness wasn’t a part of the plan, but it wasn’t his fault. Sebastian was baiting him, he had to, and he wouldn’t fall for this. Not this time.

“As long as I hold the contract, you’ll follow me anywhere even if I don’t call you, won’t you?” Ciel asked. He knew the answer already but with Sebastian, no certainty ever lasted long. Even if he wasn’t overly rattled by what happened, it was still disturbing. He felt vulnerable from being knocked out this instantly, without a chance to even open his mouth for a call.

A brief dark smirk on Sebastian’s face told him that he quickly guessed the reason for Ciel’s question.

“The evidence of the contract, a symbol that its holder bears, allows the demon to always keep sight on its prey,” Sebastian told him, approaching his cage slowly, his gaze heavy with something Ciel couldn’t decipher. “The more noticeable the symbol is, the more power it contains that the holder can use to execute his will.”

What was he getting at? It wasn’t like Ciel didn’t know all that.

“But in exchange...” Sebastian let his voice trail off and Ciel suddenly understood what he was implying with perfect clarity.

Of course. Another power move. Another reminder that despite all his attempts, despite the illusion of freedom, he would never get away.

“The escape from that demon becomes an impossibility,” he finished grimly. Sebastian grinned at him, something soft yet predatory in his expression. He touched the bars of the cage and with no visible effort, pulled them apart as if they were made of fabric.

“Yes,” Sebastian said, his eyes alight with deadly and gentle indulgence one might show to the cow they were about to slaughter for food. “No matter where you go, I shall keep you company. To the very end. Even if this body were to be destroyed, I would never, ever leave your side. To the very depths of hell, I will follow you.”

Strong hands wrapped around his shoulders, pulling him out of the cage before carefully setting him on the floor.

“And unlike humans, I don’t lie,” he added. One barely noticeable snap of fingers — and the tight ropes fell down, finally letting Ciel’s wrists breathe. He stared at Sebastian solemnly, wondering if
this deliberate display of demonic power was meant to intimidate him.

If anything, it served to remind him that while he was busy trying to cure himself from unexpectedly intensified attachment, Sebastian was feeling exactly the same thing he felt when they were finalising their contract: nothing. Nothing but hunger. He might hate every instance of Ciel trying to put distance between them but it wasn’t for emotional reasons, never for them.

It stung like it always did but at the same time, such honesty was refreshing. Whenever Ciel doubted himself or others, he knew he could rely on Sebastian to tell him the truth. It was far more important than his own pathetic sensibilities.

“That’s fine,” he said and was treated to Sebastian’s briefly incredulous expression. “You, you in particular… Don’t lie to me. Ever.”

That already familiar emotion of gentle indulgence shone in Sebastian’s stare as he bowed to him, his hand pressed against his chest.

“Yes, my lord,” he said, a quiet conviction in his voice, and Ciel nodded at him before turning to Chamber. He was still out of it, his mouth open in a disturbed ‘oh’, and though the desire to kick him was strong, Ciel managed to keep his legs from moving. This crime scene would be clean — let Randall see that his work wasn’t always bloody and riddled with bodies, and that he could provide a whole room of unconscious but otherwise unharmed criminals.

“The Jack the Ripper case is solved, then,” he uttered. “I must say, I’m disappointed.” He certainly expected a killer of a higher class than this pompous and vain man.

“Scotland Yard will most likely be arriving soon,” Sebastian commented lightly. “Staying for too long would be unwise.”

Oh, so he wasn’t the only one regretting not being able to play with every person in this room. So many victims and neither Ciel nor Sebastian could touch any of them. That was one of the drawbacks of dealing with criminals among the elite: the reports they would have to send to the Queen had to be much more detailed. Ciel hoped Chamber would be still executed but now that he saw his popularity first-hand, he doubted it. Imprisonment was the likelier outcome.

The room tilted suddenly as he was lifted off the floor unceremoniously, and Ciel gasped, staring at Sebastian in shock. It was unexpected, though he couldn’t say why. Sebastian did carry him around whenever they had to leave... was it the dress that made it different or the way Sebastian had done it? Usually, he offered Ciel to carry him by reaching out for him, he never just grabbed him unless the situation was urgent.

“Let us be on our way,” Sebastian said, his eyes cunning, and then, before Ciel could register it, he dashed forward and jumped right out of the window, with the cool wind smashing in their faces.

The initial surprise faded and Ciel put his hands on the back of Sebastian’s neck, letting his fingers twist in his dark hair. If Sebastian insisted on carrying him so strangely, with Ciel half-sitting on his arm, then his hair would have to pay the price every time Ciel felt he was in the danger of falling.

Sebastian landed on the roof before gazing at him mischievously.

“Are you ready to go home, my lord?” he asked. Ciel rolled his eyes.

“Stop showing off,” he ordered. “And get us home quick because I don’t intend to spend another ten minutes in this corset.”
“As you wish.” Sebastian flew up into the air again and Ciel tightened his grip on his hair, squinting and letting the wind caress his face.

On the second thought, having Sebastian hold him like this was enjoyable. It was like he himself was flying, looking at the dark and quiet London stretching beneath, seeing all the endless space around them.

With a sigh, Ciel shifted and wrapped his hands around Sebastian’s neck, leaning against him.

It wasn’t a weakness, not at all. This was just a quiet moment that Ciel was going to enjoy, and he wouldn’t feel guilty because of it. Not now, at least.
Hello, everyone - I'm so sorry for such a long wait! Some bad things happened, but fortunately, I feel much better now. Thank you all for your words of encouragement, they mean the world to me! Additional thanks to Plague of Insomnia for constant support and motivation. I wish all of you the happiest holidays and a wonderful start of a new year. I’m posting this chapter now and I’ll be replying to comments to the last one throughout today. Just wanted to share it as soon as possible)) We're closing Jack the Ripper arc here.

Ciel fully intended to start the next day by savouring his last night’s accomplishment. Each case he completed left him with a sharp, heady feeling of victory, reminding him that he deserved the position he was holding. Every drop of triumph helped level the scales, bringing him closer to the success of his predecessor. Soon, both sides would have equal weights on them, and then Ciel’s would grow heavier. He wouldn’t simply protect his family’s name, he would make it shine brighter than it had ever shone before.

There was also the fact that he enjoyed reading about the results of his and Sebastian’s work in fresh newspapers, especially if the image of Randall’s sour face was printed beneath. But this morning, smugness was replaced by a wave of impotent rage that almost made him smash his teacup against the wall. Madam Red’s presence was the only thing that held him back.

Jack the Ripper strikes again?! Another murder! One more prostitute dead, mutilated, and displayed! Scotland Yard is at a Loss!

The headlines were often misleading, but not in this case. Just looking at the description was enough to make it clear: Chamber was a disgusting criminal but he wasn’t their murderer.

They had to start from the beginning.

“Bring me the files, Sebastian,” Ciel said, trying to reign in his temper. Madam Red was watching him curiously, as if she didn’t understand the gravity of the situation. Maybe she didn’t. She certainly didn’t seem upset or surprised. “And come with me. I have to discuss something with you.”

Sebastian bowed and followed him obediently. Once they moved far enough, which eliminated the chance of being overheard, Ciel whirled around, hissing, “How could this have happened? You told me you checked all alibis. Viscount Druitt was the only one who fit the requirements. Did you miss someone?”

“No,” Sebastian’s lips stretched in a smile Ciel didn’t understand. It was condescending and gleeful, as if he knew something and was deliberately hiding it. “I’m fairly certain the name of the murderer is on that list.”

“Well, if it’s not Druitt, who else could it be?”
“This is your case, Master. I’m but a pawn.”

Oh, they were back to this, then. Very well.

“Check the alibis again,” Ciel ordered, turning away from that smile. He wasn’t in the mood to be made fun of, especially for reasons he didn’t understand. “In addition, find out where the viscount is now. Maybe Scotland Yard is even more pathetic than I believed and they accepted the bribe for his release. He might still be our killer.”

“As you wish.”

“With alibis, be more thorough. Report to me only when you have interviewed everyone. Just looking at their souls isn’t enough this time — what if the Ripper has an accomplice who helps him but who doesn’t participate in murders? This person could be on the list, but I imagine their soul wouldn’t be ‘putrid’, meaning that you would have likely missed him. Or vice versa: the killer might have an alibi for one murder committed by an accomplice but not for others. Question everyone thoroughly.”

There was no answer, so Ciel turned to Sebastian again. The smile had disappeared from his lips, replaced by an attentive, intense look.

“If that’s what you think, Master,” he said neutrally. Ciel shrugged.

“It’s either Druitt or you’ve made a mistake with alibis. It’s obvious. If it’s the latter, the possibility of there being two killers could be a good explanation. Bring me all related files, I’ll look through them myself. You focus on Druitt and on all alibis.”

Sebastian nodded. The curiosity in his gaze didn’t lessen, so Ciel headed towards his office with a frustrated sigh. Couldn’t he have gotten a normal demon? This one was determined to stir troubles and make an already complex case even more complicated. He really didn’t need all that today.

When the files arrived, he delved into them, checking every detail and trying to find connections. On the one hand, there were plenty of them. On the other, none was of them were promising enough to bring instant gratification.

All women were prostitutes who frequented similar places. All were unsuccessfully involved in relationships with men at some stage of their life. All lacked money and relied on charity. Interestingly, all visited the hospital where Madam Red worked. Could the killer have noticed them there? Ciel would have to clarify what men were working at the time of the murdered women’s documented visits.

Maybe he could track it via the list Sebastian had composed? All places of suspects’ occupation were pointed out there.

Ciel grabbed the file, scanning it from top to bottom.

No. Only six males were working at the hospital at the right time, and they were too old to be considered suspects. A visitor, then? Someone pretending to be a patient? Or maybe the idea that the killer had medical background was a misconception. It could be a butcher, and if so, they’d have to search through the local market that each woman visited.

How unbelievably frustrating. If Sebastian came back with nothing, the new search was going to take days, maybe longer. The frequency of murders was escalating, and who knew how many more victims would there be before the killer was caught?
They had to take one step at a time. The hospital was the likeliest choice, and when checking it, perhaps they could follow the prostitutes themselves... If they couldn’t find a killer, they could find the next victim.

Suddenly excited, Ciel pulled the previously discarded folder back close, feeling how his fingers started trembling with anticipation.

Here. All women visited the hospital within the same fifteen days. There was only one more name in the records — one more women had come for medical assistance during this timeframe and could have been potentially noticed by a killer.

It could lead to nothing, but it was a worthy start. If they were lucky, they would catch the murderer right in the act, and it would be more exciting than the terrible evening he’d been forced to endure yesterday. He wouldn’t have to wear a dress either, which was a major improvement.

Pleased with himself, Ciel pushed the files away and stood up, stretching the tense muscles.

It was time for dessert.

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The evening was boring. Madam Red stuck to him like a leech, inviting him to play chess and bothering him with incessant chatter. The only reason why Ciel chose to entertain her was because this was the last day of her visit. She was leaving tonight, taking her useless servant with her, and it was encouraging enough for Ciel to make an effort and stay a welcoming host he was supposed to be.

Not without occasional cracks in the armour, though.

“I still remember the day you were born,” Madam Red said, nostalgia heavy in her voice, and Ciel tensed, already seeing where this was going.

He didn’t want to exchange memories. That part of his past was locked away, and he didn’t appreciate being reminded of it.

“You were so small and fragile, and you brought out my protective instincts,” Madam Red’s face softened even further, and as she moved towards him, Ciel blinked. She couldn’t be thinking about…

But she touched his head, warmly and affectionately, and his confusion transformed into stillness he didn’t understand.

He disliked being touched. He endured Elisabeth’s excited and suffocating hugs, just as he endured Madam Red’s attempts at smothering him, yet this… this was different. Madam Red was strangely serious, and for some reason, her touch seemed more genuine than all previous touches combined.

“I was unable to have children, but I really do think of you as my own son,” she was saying, and Ciel’s heart jerked strangely as he stared at her wide-eyed.

They never talked about feelings. Not like this. This was distinctly uncomfortable, but at the same time, it sparked something in his chest. The spark was weak and hesitant, but it was there and Ciel
had absolutely no idea what to do about it.

“If possible, I’d like you to…” Madam Red continued, and these words sent him back to reality.

She wanted something from him. Of course. She wanted him to abandon his duty and to revert to the state of a small boy who didn’t think evil existed. The touch was a manipulation. How predictable.

Sneering, Ciel pushed her hand away.

“This is the task I’ve chosen freely,” he told her. “It’s my choice to make and no one else’s. I don’t regret my decisions and I won’t be coddled by anyone.”

Madam Red looked wounded, and Ciel pursed his lips. This wouldn’t work on him. He wasn’t that naïve.

“I didn’t mean—” she began, but he interrupted her.

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t raise this topic again. Please return to your seat. We have to finish the game properly.”

He was sure he caught a flash of resignation in Madam Red’s eyes. She wavered, nodded, and did as he’d said.

Good. Ciel didn’t know what was happening to her, and frankly, he wasn’t interested in learning. After today, she would likely be gone for months, which would allow him to focus on his actual task.

He had a killer to catch.

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The end of the evening was boring. After Madam Red left, Sebastian had also departed, claiming he had to check several more names. Ciel decided to wait for him, but as tiredness inevitably took over, he fell asleep despite having left the lights on.

Still, a part of his mind, the one he despised vehemently, sensed Sebastian the second he entered his room, sending him a ‘wake up’ signal. Ciel opened his eyes and looked up sleepily.

“Well?” he murmured.

“No matter how many times I re-examine it, the answer is the same,” Sebastian looked very busy, still going through the files, and Ciel frowned. Something wasn’t right here.

“So the viscount isn’t involved in yesterday’s case?” he clarified.

“That is correct. None of the people at his mansion could have done it either.”

“Right,” Ciel said absentmindedly. “No person could be that quick...”

Something about Sebastian bothered him. He’d seen him concerned or eager to solve the riddle, and despite his attempts to demonstrate a similar behaviour now, it just didn’t feel real. His concern
was fake. The way he’d been examining those pages with names and alibis just now, as if looking for mistakes, was also fake — if Sebastian came to report, it meant he was fully confident about the accuracy of his information. In addition, there was some eagerness about him. Barely noticeable, but it was there. He was vibrating from anticipation of something — Ciel felt it almost physically.

His morning impression had been correct, Sebastian was playing a game. But which one?

Or was he overthinking everything? Sebastian had brought him what he’d asked for. Druitt wasn’t guilty. Apparently, the alibis of everyone else were solid — not to mention that the majority of suspects from the list had been present at yesterday’s ball and they couldn’t have murdered anyone because there was simply no time. No person could manage that.

They’d have to start examining the hospital, then, just as he’d planned. Medical background was no longer a requirement, which opened new opportunities. The murderer could be anyone — a visitor, a janitor, a student.

“At any rate,” Ciel began, “tomorrow we shall…” Then he stopped.

Sebastian had given him two conflicting answers. In the morning, he said he’s certain that the name of the killer was on the list. A minute ago, he said that no matter how thorough he was, “the answer was the same”. The same as in “no suspects”? Or something else?

Only several people possessed putrid souls and medical background. Everyone apart from Druitt had alibis for at least one of the murders… all but one. A person whose guilt Ciel hadn’t even considered, whose absence of alibi he noted but hadn’t questioned because he placed her into a group of those with bland souls without even asking Sebastian.

The hospital each of the victims had visited. The only person who lacked all alibis except for last night and who hadn’t been interviewed. The game Sebastian was so clearly playing, waiting for some reaction from him…

The list did have a name of the murderer. Someone with medical education, someone who worked at the right hospital and whom Sebastian hadn’t bothered to talk to. He hadn’t bothered because he knew Ciel wouldn’t mind, after seeing his lack of reaction to her absence of alibi.

How had Sebastian learned about the absence of alibi without even talking to her? Easily. After all, they spent all time under one roof.

The exception that filled in the blanks.

“Sebastian!” he breathed out, feeling like pure ice was injected into his veins. “It can’t be!”

Sebastian smiled in his perverse pleasure, his teeth glistening in the light.

“I’ve told you many times, have I not? I will not lie to you,” he said, and Ciel nearly growled. He wouldn’t lie? Forget the semantics, all he did was lie, again and again, even when… even when…

“Of those with proficiency in medical arts, connections to black magic or cults, and the lack of an alibi at the time of the incidents, Viscount Druitt is the only one who fits the profile,” Sebastian shrugged, and Ciel bared his teeth, balling his hands into fists.

The criteria had been wrong from the beginning. Sebastian had been toying with him all this time — he knew. He knew and he laughed at his obliviousness. He anticipated his horror and couldn’t wait to step on his shock.
“Does that mean the investigation was just a farce, then?” Ciel spat. He had always believed that Sebastian was taking their tasks seriously. He was wrong.

“I am merely one hell of a butler,” Sebastian’s face took on a meek expression, and more than anything, Ciel wanted to hit him. Hit him hard enough to make him bleed. “I am faithful only to that which my Master has ordered and asked of me.”

Ciel stiffened, seeing where this was going instantly. Tension coiled in him in a hot, painful strap, ready to burst any second.

Unable to resist his idiotic habit of being dramatic even now — especially now, to make light of this terrible situation, no doubt, Sebastian carelessly threw all pages of the list aside, letting them fly before beginning their slow and inevitable descent, and at this moment, Ciel hated him more than he ever had before.

“Under one of your orders, I am to be your pawn and your sword,” Sebastian said, a dark, twisted joy radiating off him. “So, please, Young Master, move me into check. All I need is your order.”

“Bastard,” Ciel whispered. His heart was beating somewhere in his throat, and he couldn’t speak properly, couldn’t breathe. “You told me you looked at the souls of everyone from that list. You told me none of them except for the viscount could have done it.”

“I said that I checked several alibis of those with putrid souls and merely looked at the rest of them,” Sebastian retorted lazily. “I did not tell you that the viscount is the only suspect from the former group. I called him ‘primary’ based on the criteria we’ve devised. I’m afraid it was your decision to overlook other options. Understandably, I couldn’t tell the truth to Madam Red when she asked, but I thought you’d be attentive enough to notice that she’s the only one in the list who lacks alibi in all instances. All but yesterday’s.”

“You gave me no names,” Ciel tried to steel his voice but it still came out shaky. Too shaky for his liking. “I didn’t know which people belonged to what group.”

“You didn’t ask, Young Master, did you? You automatically placed Madam Red in the second group, believing her to be innocent and ignoring all discrepancies.”

“You participated in setting the criteria and only Viscount Druitt fit them! The connection to rituals was your idea!”

“I only made a suggestion. I didn’t force you to accept it, and Viscount Druitt was in fact involved with the cults. My idea proved to be wrong as he isn’t guilty, it’s as simple as that.”

The biting reply was hot on his lips, but Ciel swallowed it forcibly and lowered his head. Closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on his heartbeat and calm it down.

He couldn’t have conversations with Sebastian when he was so emotional. He would make a mistake, he would show weakness, and Sebastian would pounce on it in an instant. Ciel could see what was happening with painful and reluctant clarity: Sebastian wanted him to order the capture or the demise of Madam Red. He was waiting for him to either break or to back down, and Ciel had to do everything to not give him that satisfaction.

He had to stay himself. He had to use all coldness he possessed to strengthen his grip on rationality and make a decision.

Sebastian’s penchant for organising cruel tests was nothing unusual. But regardless of his taunts, regardless of how panicked and lost Ciel was currently feeling, he knew that Sebastian was right. If
Madam Red was a murderer, he had no chance of covering it up. It was his duty to bring her to justice.

But why? Why would she do that? How could she be… She had always been so open, so easily excited, so compassionate. She was a good person, there was no trace of filth in her. Why…

Ciel let his nails pierce his palm, urgently shutting down every system in his mind that went out of control. One by one, each desperate voice was silenced, pushed away along with the thoughts and memories about Madam Red. When he finally looked up, his heart-rate stabilised, and a soothing calmness spread through his body, covering it with one solid shield. Ciel met Sebastian’s gaze coldly, narrowing his eyes in contemplation.

“If Madam Red has an alibi for yesterday’s murder, then she’s acting with an accomplice,” he said evenly. “But you said that people from yesterday’s event couldn’t have murdered anyone. How does that work, then? Unless…” Ciel paused. People. Grell who had come out of nowhere, with his strange obsession with death. The way he and Madam Red seemed so close, even though she wasn't usually all that fond of her servants. Could it be?.. “No. Don’t tell me that Grell is a demon. Madam Red wouldn’t…” But he didn’t know it for sure, did he? If she could murder others in such a vicious fashion, she could be vile enough to summon someone. “I refuse to believe there are demons worse than you.”

Sebastian straightened.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You are a useless demon,” Ciel noted conversationally, almost shivering in pleasure as Sebastian’s face darkened. “But in comparison to Grell, even you look impressive.”

Funnily enough, Sebastian looked at the loss for words, as if he was completely uncertain how the conversation ended here and what he was supposed to say.

“Grell isn’t a demon,” he replied finally. Amusement and glee were gone, transforming into a beautiful scowl, and Ciel took his time admiring his handiwork. “However, he is not a person either. I would call him a mediator between hell and heaven.”

“Pity. You don’t have an excuse, then.”

Sebastian’s scowl got darker. The lingering traces of smugness disappeared, too, replaced by the look he wore whenever Ciel managed to strike a blow against his pride, and Ciel drank it all in, using it as fuel for a new wave of determination.

“Your games are vulgar,” he concluded. “I expected you to work diligently. You didn’t. What, did you think the realisation that Madam Red is our killer would affect me? Please. I admit it’s unexpected. I thought Jack the Ripper is a man and I never took Madam Red for a murderer. I made a mistake in judgment, yes, but it doesn’t mean I’m incapable of admitting it and rectifying the situation. If she murdered these women, she will be punished for it. Did you expect me to react differently?”

Sebastian bowed his head, as if in respect, but Ciel had a strange feeling that he wanted to hide his face. Maybe he was also experiencing emotions he didn’t want to show?

“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” he snapped. Sebastian obeyed, but his face was carefully blank. Disappointing but not entirely unexpected. “I don’t care who the murderer is. If I have to, I will kill her with my own hands. I assure you that I take my responsibilities before the Queen
seriously. Is that understood?”

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian replied. He still wore no expression, but his eyes were alight with fervency Ciel couldn’t decipher.

“Good,” he said, stretching his legs. It was getting easier to wear the mask of calmness by the minute, as if it had truly melded with his face. “Now tell me, is there any actual evidence against her? We have to catch her in the process of kidnapping — or murder. I have a name of a possible victim but—”

“There is no need for that,” Sebastian stepped closer and then went to his knees. Ciel blinked, confused, but the confusion waned when he felt a touch of fabric against his leg. “I was tracking Grell’s movements. Tonight, he has kidnapped a prostitute named Mary Jane Kelly. She is the only remaining person who has undergone an abortion under Madam Red’s guidance and lived. I imagine you meant her? Grell is holding her near George Yard, at her own apartment. He will take Madam Red there, and if we hurry, we will arrive on time.”

A chill of dread ran down his spine, but Ciel ignored it.

He would do what he must. Personal consequences meant nothing. In the end, if he had to choose… he would choose his reputation, not family.

At least he wanted to believe that.

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They found the victim tied to a wooden chair. Her blue eyes widened when she saw them before filling with desperate hope.

“Thank Lord!” she whimpered. “Please, please help me! I don’t know why I was brought here but I think he’s going to kill me. It must be Jack the Ripper, just like the newspapers said! Please, you have to untie me.”

“Not now,” Ciel’s gaze lingered on her before he snapped it back to Sebastian. “We will wait. I want to catch them both, and I don’t want there to be any misunderstandings. We must collect the absolute evidence.”

Sebastian raised his eyebrows, looking taken aback and curious at once.

“Do you mean we should allow Grell and Madam Red to kill her?”

The woman let out a choked noise and Ciel frowned, glancing at her.

“No. We will wait near the entrance. We’ll intercept them before they go inside.”

“Don’t leave me here!” the woman’s voice gained hysterical notes. If she kept yelling like this, she might attract some attention, and this was not what they needed. He had to change his approach.

“What is your name?” Ciel asked, putting on the nicest smile he could master. Sebastian snorted, so Ciel sent him a brief glare.

“M-Mary,” the woman whispered. “Mary Jane. I… I don’t want to die.”
“You won’t,” Ciel said confidently. “We will be just behind the corner. No one will walk past us without being noticed. As soon as your kidnappers appear, we will arrest them. You will be safe. Until then, stay quiet, all right? In a few hours, your home will be safe again, and you’ll be drinking tea and sharing the details about this adventure with your friends.”

The woman laughed shakily.

“I don’t have any t-tea,” she murmured. “Not tonight.”

“I will give you enough money to buy it, then. Do you agree?”

“Yes,” she nodded, but her eyes were still wide and scared. “D-do you promise? Do you promise I’ll be safe?”

“Of course,” Ciel uttered smoothly. He wondered if he should touch her hand or hair. Would she find that soothing? People normally liked being comforted through physical contact.

In the end, he failed to decide where he should put his hand, so he just gave her another reassuring smile and walked out of the building.

It was raining. Ciel shivered, wrapping his hands around himself.

“You lie effortlessly, Young Master,” Sebastian commented. He was watching him, his fascination so palpable that Ciel nearly forgot about his intention to stay angry. “However, you need to work on your smile. It didn’t look authentic.”

“She bought it, didn’t she?” Ciel retorted. “And how could you see my smile, I turned my back to you.”

“I could hear it in your voice. I don’t need to see your face to understand when you’re smiling.”

“So was my smile or my voice inauthentic?”

“Your smile. You put a rather convincing amount of warmth into your voice to fool others.”

Ciel wasn’t sure what it meant that Sebastian was paying attention to such things about him. A few hours ago, it would have likely pleased him. His need for Sebastian’s attention continued to plague him regardless of his efforts to get rid of it. But after learning the truth about Jack the Ripper, about the way Sebastian had turned this case into a farce… He felt too tense. Too upset. And he wasn’t in the mood to decipher what Sebastian’s words or actions meant.

“My lord, I hope you realize that we have only a small chance of saving that woman?” Sebastian asked after a short silence. “Grell isn’t human. I’m not sure what abilities he possesses, but the victim might die before we reach her.”

Ciel snorted.

“Do you take me for an idiot?” he asked condescendingly. “Of course I realize it. But I cannot rely on the words of a prostitute. Even if I did and she identified Grell as her kidnapper, Madam Red would remain unpunished. She has a flawless alibi for the last night. She would blame Grell and we would never refute her words. I won’t let it happen. I need her to compromise herself before taking any actions.”

He hoped it sounded convincing enough for Sebastian to believe it. Not that it wasn’t the truth, but it wasn’t the complete one either. Justice was a worthy goal, but first and foremost, Ciel wanted to
see Madam Red for himself. He needed this confirmation. He needed to make sure this wasn’t a strange coincidence and that she was indeed guilty.

He hoped Mary Jane wouldn’t die. Grell might move fast, but Sebastian wasn’t slow either. They had a chance to stop the murder from happening, but even if they ended up sacrificing this woman’s life, so be it. Ciel was prepared for it. Catching Madam Red was more important.

But when the high and hopeless scream sounded, he was suddenly not that sure.

“There shouldn’t have been any way for someone to go through!” he said stupidly, his heartbeat jumping from calm to frantic in the matter of seconds.

“Let’s go,” Sebastian murmured, the familiar twisted excitement creeping in his voice, but Ciel didn’t even stay to glare at him. He broke into a run, hoping that maybe, the woman could still be alive. Jack the Ripper didn’t kill in one strike, right? Those mutilations had to take time.

Then again, maybe not. Maybe they happened post mortem.

Without waiting for Sebastian, Ciel burst through the door, and a small spray of blood hit him in the face the same instant. He froze, wide-eyed, staring at the body.

Blood. So much blood. And tears that were still running down Mary Jane’s cheeks, leaving her dull and empty eyes, reminding him of…

The pang of guilt lessened, dissolving in much darker memories, but Ciel shook his head briefly, chasing them away. After the days he’d spent with Tanaka, trying to destroy his pitiful attachment to Sebastian, these memories could no longer hurt him. He didn’t lose his grip on reality — he stayed alert and collected.

No, it wasn’t the nightmare of his past that sent his mind crashing. It was a painfully familiar face staring at him from semi-darkness.

He hadn’t wanted to believe it. Despite all the evidence, despite Sebastian’s conviction, he had been hoping they were wrong.

They weren’t.

“Don’t look!”

Sebastian finally reached him. Before Ciel could say anything, Sebastian covered his eyes with one hand and wrapped the other one around his waist, jumping backward, doing it so swiftly that Ciel felt his hat fall off. He gasped, both from the unexpectedness of the movement and from the impact of what he’d seen.

Madam Red was there. In the room with a dead body. Madam Red and Grell.

She was a murderer. A violent and deranged murderer.

How could he have not seen it?

For a while, all sounds disappeared. Ciel was sucking in the air greedily, trying to find a balance in the storm of memories that he had never expected to be tainted.

He had always treated Madam Red indulgently. He didn’t take her seriously, viewing her as vain and overly loud, but she was his family. She was his. And now, all those moments he never even
knew mattered were shattered by the realisation that none of them had been truthful. Everything was a lie. Everything. The person he thought he knew had never existed.

With an effort, Ciel pushed the memories deep down, as far as he could manage, to a mental chest with other dead things he no longer wanted to remember. As soon as they were gone, his steadiness began to return. He was no longer suffocating, and the bits of conversation between Sebastian and Grell started to register in his mind.

“"You are supposed to be a neutral being in the balance between gods and humans,” Sebastian was saying. There was a rebuke in his voice, but even in his half-confounded state, Ciel could say it was artificial. For whatever reason, Sebastian was delighted to meet Grell. Or maybe he just liked seeing another supernatural creature here. “A Grim Reaper,” Sebastian added, and if his mood was a little better, Ciel would have snorted at the irony. Reaper. Ripper. Grell probably loved the nickname he and Madam Red had been given.

“"Why would a divine being like you become a butler?” Sebastian wondered. He was still holding him tightly with both hands, and at this second, Ciel wasn’t willing to try and free himself. The warmth from Sebastian’s touch enveloped him in a protective blanket, giving him a deceptive feeling of safety and filling him with more confidence.

Whatever deal Madam Red had struck with Grell, she hadn’t fallen as low as Ciel. She hadn’t summoned a demon, having to settle for some mediocre intermediary creature. Ciel was darker, and it meant that he would be able to deal with her. If a demon from hell itself was on his side, he had enough strength and cruelty to do what he must.

“"Indeed,” Grell drawled. He sounded different. The reverent undertones were gone, replaced by deep dramatic tilts. “For now, we shall say that I fell in love with a woman.”

Fell in love with a…? Ciel swallowed, disgust rising within him. Madam Red and Grell? She was engaged in an actual relationship with a servant, a non-human creature?

Maybe she had fallen lower than him.

“"And that woman is?” Sebastian asked with mild interest.

“"You already know the answer. Why do you ask?”

Her voice sounded different, too. It was cold and clear, no traces of flirtation or hysteria. At the unmistakable sound of footsteps, Ciel finally straightened and removed Sebastian’s hand from his eyes, although he continued to hold it in his for a while, absorbing the last bits of comfort.

There was no running from this. He would see her for what she was. He was ready.

She stood before him in her red coat, with narrowed eyes and grim expression on her face. The only sign that belied her possible turmoil was her arms crossed across her chest.

“Madam,” Ciel said quietly. He finally released Sebastian’s hand, briefly surprised when Sebastian’s fingers clung to his, as if unwilling to let go. Clearing his throat, he stepped away.

“This was beyond my expectations,” Madam Red commented calmly. “I never thought that there would be someone able to see Grell’s true nature.”

“"Of course, you were on the suspect list from the very beginning, Madam,” Ciel told her. His voice was subdued but sufficiently indifferent. “However, your alibi was perfect.” For the last night. Ciel had no desire to let her know that he’d stupidly ignored the possibility of her being a murderer
before that. Better let her think she’s smart than admit he could be this naïve.

As he’d expected, she tilted her head, bemused.

“You even suspected me, one of your relatives?”

“When it comes to a murderer like Jack, blood relations do not matter,” Ciel retorted. With the back of his head, he sensed how Sebastian looked at him, probably wondering if his resolve was genuine.

It was.

“It was impossible for any human on that list to be involved in all the incidents. However, if the accomplice were inhuman, that would change the game completely. If they were able to get into a room within a split second without us noticing, then they could move from the viscount’s home to East End in an instant. In the end, you two were the only ones who could be “Jack the Ripper”… Madam Red and Grell Sutcliffe.” Ciel looked at Grell briefly and did a double-take. This was the first time he truly noticed him tonight. What the hell was this… thing? Long red hair, weird red glasses, and a mouth full of monster teeth. This was how the real Grell looked like? This was his true form?

Ciel sincerely hoped Sebastian didn’t look anything like that. Even the new and terrifying form he’d seen at night several days ago was preferable to this idiocy.

“There were other connecting factors among the victims of Jack the Ripper,” he continued, still eyeing Grell in distaste. “They all underwent a certain surgery at the Central London hospital where you work, Madam. Among the list of patients we compiled, the only one who had not been killed yet was the woman named Mary Kelly. We knew that if we loitered around here, you’d be sure to show up.”

For a second, a memory of a dead woman flashed in his mind. Grell had to have kidnapped her when Madam Red was still at Ciel’s house, playing chess with him and urging him not to follow the path of his predecessor.

Even that wasn’t authentic. She wasn’t worried about him, she was worried about getting caught. And she still participated in tonight’s murder.

“We could not save her, though,” Ciel added softly. Madam Red sneered.

“This is so unfortunate, Ciel, my adorable nephew,” she sighed. “If you hadn’t gotten to the bottom of this, we would have been able to play chess again.”

Ciel levelled her with a cold glance. Since he was staring so intently, he noticed the moment when her eyes flared with something bloodthirsty and wild. Her hands clenched into fists.

“But I will not yield this time!” she screamed. To echo her scream, Grell turned on something loud and screeching. Ciel only had time to blink when he realised that this noisy something was approaching him quickly, ready to land a blow. He recoiled, but Sebastian interfered before Grell’s weapon could touch him. He caught it with his hands, and the aura around him changed from amusement to deadliness in what seemed like an instant. Making some sharp movement, he sent Grell flying, and then he jumped back smoothly, completely defying the laws of gravity.

“What is that?” Ciel exclaimed. Sebastian didn’t reply at first, keeping his protective crouch warily, but then he dropped his arms and straightened.
“Reapers have a tool they use to hunt people’s souls,” he explained, though he sounded as flabbergasted as Ciel was feeling. “It’s called the Reaper’s Scythe.”

“Don’t give it an unfashionable name like “scythe”!” Grell protested aggressively. Ciel gaped while Sebastian covered him again, probably not sure what to expect from this madman. “I took such trouble to customise it! It can shred any substance that stands in its way. Only I am permitted this death-scythe. I was playing nice for so long that my skills have grown rusty, so I want a good workout with you!”

Grell’s voice deepened at the last word, and Ciel felt like the world had stopped making any sense completely. Grell was eager to fight Sebastian and he called it a workout? What kind of laws existed in this other world he knew almost nothing about?

“Can you refrain from making such repulsive comments?” Sebastian asked, unimpressed. “I am in the middle of my work.”

Ciel sent him a confused gaze. What was so repulsive about Grell wanting to fight him? Was he missing something?

Grell started to rave about some nonsensical things again, so Ciel stopped listening. He focused on Madam Red. The explosion of wild rage was gone, and now her face was detached and emotionless. How could someone pretend so well? How could someone so cheerful have so much hatred and mindless violence in them?

“I will carve you down to your inner depths, scattering that beautiful red colour everywhere!” Grell sang, and Ciel bristled. As if this clown stood a chance against Sebastian.

Sebastian didn’t appear worried either. He deliberately turned away from Grell, demonstrating his unprotected back, and faced Ciel instead.

“Reapers are those who should peacefully hunt down souls heading for death,” he said, unbuttoning his coat. “Butlers are those who should obey their masters like loyal shadows.”

Before Ciel could react, Sebastian put his coat around him, carefully adjusting the hoodie so it would cover him from the rain. This was completely unnecessary — first, he was already wet, and second, he wasn’t made of sugar, some water would certainly not kill him! Yet his treacherous hands clenched the coat greedily, pulling it even closer. It still held traces of Sebastian’s warmth.

“Your poor taste, which violates both of those ideals, sickens me quite a lot,” Sebastian finished, turning to face Grell again. Grell started to reply, but Ciel didn’t even listen.

Enough was enough.

Forcing his fingers to detach themselves from Sebastian’s coat, he pressed them to his right eye.

“On behalf of Her Majesty and my own,” he said frigidly, “I order you to dispose of them.”

His mark flared.

Ciel wasn’t watching the fight. He knew Sebastian would win — if not immediately, then eventually. He stood in front of Madam Red, and now, when there was no Sebastian separating them, Ciel found that he couldn’t look at her face again.

He had done what he had to. He’d signed her death warrant. He had no desire to keep looking at her, though he still caught every word she was saying.
“I didn’t expect you to actually go through with it,” Madam Red drawled. “Ruthlessness must be in your blood. To kill a relative? How discourteous of you.”

Ciel said nothing.

“You and I have become the guard dog and the prey,” Madam Red chuckled. And then, just like it happened before, she went from calmness to unexplainable fury in the matter of seconds. “If you’re going to hunt me down, then I can only do the same!”

Ciel’s eyes widened in shock when she rushed at him. He made his frozen body move only at the last moment, and the dagger Madam Red must have retrieved at some point pierced his arm, leaving a deep, agonising cut. Ciel let out a pained sound and jerked, staring at his bleeding wound in disbelief. The knife had gone in deeply. His whole arm felt on fire, and this fire was rapidly devouring his self-control, all the barriers he had built.

She hurt him. She actually hurt him.

“You are a doctor!” he blurted out, realising how childish and vulnerable his voice sounded but suddenly unable to care about it. “Why would you do that?!”

The chest he had just locked burst open again, with memories escaping in unstoppable quantities. He felt wounded. Wounded in more ways than one, something he hadn’t thought he was still capable of.

“Even if I explained, a brat like you would never understand!” Madam Red cried out. There was so much despair and bitterness in her words that Ciel’s lips parted in surprise, but he didn’t even have time to say anything because a strong arm wrapped around his throat, throwing him against the wall. The air was knocked out of him forcibly, and slowly but steadily, a fire started to spread through his lungs.

A gun. He had a gun in his back pocket. His right arm was no longer functional, but he could shoot with his left, too. Sebastian had insisted on teaching him every stance there existed.

“A brat like you…” Madam Red repeated, but her voice wavered. Her voice wavered, and just like that, the thoughts about the gun left Ciel’s head.

Something happened. Something must have happened to her.

“Like you…” she tried again, even more hoarsely. Then she raised her hand with the knife, an already familiar madness looking at Ciel through her eyes. “You should have never been born!”

Ciel drew in a breath sharply, staring at her in genuine, hurt bewilderment. He couldn’t understand her words. He couldn’t make sense of them. Why would she hate him? What had he ever done to her?

He knew he’d lost. She would kill him and he was paralysed, unable to make himself move. But instead of plunging into his body, like it’d done to so many victims, the knife trembled.

“Sister…” Madam Red whispered. That one word must have somehow torn through all the layers of hatred and fury because suddenly, she didn’t look ready to kill him. Her grip on his throat loosened and she stepped back.

She looked at him with love. She looked like his aunt again.

“Young Master!” Sebastian bellowed, and he sounded so uncharacteristically terrified that Ciel
looked at him instinctively. As soon as their gazes met, Sebastian jerked forward, and a huge spray of his blood surged up. Ciel’s body also jerked, as if he was the one being hurt, his heart thrashing violently in yet another shock.

Sebastian was hurt — really hurt this time. And all because he decided to protect him from…

Oh. Oh, no.

“Don’t, Sebastian!” Ciel screamed. Everything was happening so quickly, he could barely see a dark shadow and glistening red eyes. “Don’t kill her!”

Everything stopped. Ciel could see Sebastian frozen in the air, his hand inches from Madam Red’s head. His eyes were still unnaturally red and vicious.

If Ciel had been even one second late with his cry, Sebastian would have torn her head right off her shoulders. He looked murderous. And then his brows furrowed, and he started to look uncomprehending.

Madam Red dropped the knife, but right now, Ciel could care less about her. His eyes were glued to Sebastian’s collarbone. It was cut almost in half, with pieces of torn flesh peeking out and blood oozing in endless streams.

“Sebastian…” Ciel whispered. His heart was still beating madly, and something hot filled his eyes.

No, no, he couldn’t cry. He wouldn’t. He was stronger than this — Sebastian was a demon, he couldn’t die, and his wounds would heal themselves quickly. But it was all suddenly too much. This whole evening, this night — he couldn’t stand it. He needed to find an anchor urgently but it just wasn’t there. His mind was plunged into utter chaos.

“My, Sebby, you’re so daring!” Grell cooed. “Even at the cost of an arm, you went to save that kid!”

Ciel flinched, unable to stop himself.

“On the other hand, you’re a disappointment, Madam.” Grell grimaced. “Hurry up and get rid of the brat already!”

Sebastian snarled quietly, crouching, but Madam Red didn’t even look at the knife. Instead, she looked at Ciel, and her eyes were full of tears.

“I can’t,” she choked out. “I just can’t. I can’t kill this child.”

A part of Ciel that clung to darkness melted. He didn’t see or hear anything else. He could only see her. His aunt.

“Madam,” he whispered.

How strange. He had never thought he loved her until this moment.

She turned to Grell, still crying.

“This child is my ne…”

The next thing Ciel saw was blood. Even more of that hateful blood. Grell’s Scythe, or however it was called, was thrust into Madam Red’s chest, and strange colourful ribbons spread from her, showing the endless moments of… what was that?
Shell-shocked, Ciel caught a glimpse of his own smiling face, then that of his parents.

Memories.

***

He watched silently, unmoving, struggling with understanding what reality was and wasn’t. The entire life Madam Red had lived was coiling nearby, but he managed to catch only some parts of it.

His… his parents. Meeting. Falling in love. Being buried together.

Ciel had never known how the funeral had gone. He hadn’t thought of that much — at the time, he was too busy with his own torture. But he was seeing the reflections of it now, and no matter how brief they were, he knew he’s not going to forget them. Not ever.

He saw Madam Red’s love and her hatred. He saw her growing bitterness and watched how she slipped into a dangerous delusion, hoping that by murdering others, she would be able to cope with her own pain. She might have stopped herself if not for Grell, who had come out of nowhere.

A chance encounter. An encounter that destroyed any possibility of the things changing.

The tape ended. Ciel continued to stand, too numb to move or to even feel much. Without the ribbons, Madam Red looked small and empty. A dead doll, not a person she’d been just five minutes ago. Her eyes were open and glassy, with tears of vulnerability still brimming in their corners.

She shouldn’t look like that. The pain was gone now, and she could finally have peace.

Slowly, Ciel went to his knees, closing her eyes with his hand. A part of his mind registered that Grell was walking away from them, bored and indifferent, and that Sebastian wasn’t in the hurry to follow.


Sebastian didn’t reply, and when Ciel finally turned to him, he saw his widened, astonished eyes. Even his lips were parted.

“Don’t stand around,” Ciel ordered, mystified himself. What made Sebastian so surprised? Had he believed Ciel would revoke his order for some reason? “Get rid of the other one.”

Finally, the expression of amazement dissipated, replaced by a pleased look.

“Certainly,” Sebastian agreed.

Ciel watched Grell turn, pretending to be saddened by the upcoming fight. His excited stare told a different story.

“Both of you will go to Heaven together!” he promised, and Sebastian chuckled.

His ensuing laughter was low and sinister, more resembling that of a monster than of a man he was pretending to be. Ciel watched, although he couldn’t bring himself to enjoy the commencing show. His emotions went silent, with only tiredness and apathy remaining.

“Do you really think a demon can win against a God?” Grell scoffed incredulously.

“I wonder,” Sebastian replied, and a weak pang of unease shot through Ciel. He wasn’t sure? How could that be?

As if sensing his thoughts, Sebastian looked at him. He didn’t look worried in the least: his gaze was warm, his smile serene.

“However, if my Young Master has told me to win,” he said, “then I shall win.”

Ciel held his gaze, feeling something in his chest wake up. Sebastian’s coat was still around him and he hugged it tighter.

“You sure care a lot about that little brat,” Grell noted, first notes of annoyance distorting his voice. “You’ll get burnt. Even if you are a demon, if I plunge my death-scythe into you, you’ll die. Aren’t you scared?”

“Not at all,” Sebastian uttered, and based on his voice, Ciel could tell he was smiling. “I belong to my Master. My body and soul, down to the last hair, are his. As long as the contract continues, obeying his orders is my duty as a butler.”

His words were reverent, but instead of pleasing him, they terrified him. Ciel flinched when the merciless realisation crashed into him.

His weakness. That’s what it was about. After tonight, he’d have to do a very intensive damage control, proving again and again that he wasn’t actually an emotional wreck and that their contract had to continue.

When it came down to it, he couldn’t kill Madam Red, and Sebastian knew it. That was why he looked so surprised when Ciel demanded him to kill Grell. He must have thought Ciel had lost himself, turning into a pathetic, worthless child.

At least his actions had murdered Mary Jane. In this situation, it was good. Not everything was lost, Ciel could still earn Sebastian’s respect back. Ordering him to kill Grell was a step in the right direction.

The coat began to feel heavy and cold. Ciel took it off and turned his back to the battle. Carefully, he covered Madam Red, hiding her face from view.

There. She would be warmer like this and he wouldn’t have to look at her. Wouldn’t have to feel the weight of the coat on his shoulders either.

Above him, the fight went on. Ciel purposefully didn’t look up, but considering where he was sitting, the echo of voices still reached him. There was a crash, and then Grell crowed, “A thousand farewells! Now, show me your most dramatic memories!”

What?

Despite his inner protests, Ciel raised his head and froze.

Sebastian was surrounded by the ribbons, too. The ribbons that had to symbolise death.
But that wasn’t possible. That wasn’t possible, Sebastian was strong — Grell might have a dangerous weapon but he was an idiot. He could never beat Sebastian, Ciel refused to believe that.

He wanted to scream, but his voice didn’t obey him. Gasping in a fruitless attempt to breathe, he stretched his hand in Sebastian’s direction helplessly, but it fell when he realised Sebastian didn’t seem to be dying. On the contrary, he seemed just as interested in his memories as Grell was, probably wondering which ones would be the most dramatic.

He was all right. Sebastian was simply toying with Grell — he had to be. In fact, he had probably calculated everything and allowed himself to be hit in a non-lethal way deliberately, wondering how the Reaper’s Scythe would work on him.

That big idiot.

Ciel relaxed, a smile twitching at the corner of his lips. He couldn’t see much from here, but in the silence that stretched, he could hear weak voices coming from the tape. What were Sebastian’s most dramatic memories? What had affected him? What broke him?

His curiosity flared, bright and unexpectedly greedy, but then he recognised the voices and curiosity turned into stupor.

He could hear Tanaka. And Bard. And Mey-Rin with Finnie. Over and over again, in a long series of their interactions with Sebastian.

“What the hell is this?” Grell yelped, and for a change, Ciel agreed completely. What in the world was this about? This was drama, in Sebastian’s understanding? *This?*

Of course. Sebastian was a demon and demons didn’t have feelings. If this wasn’t the biggest and the ugliest piece of evidence, Ciel didn’t know what else was.

Sickened, he stopped looking, staring at Madam Red’s covered body unseeing.

Fool. What a fool he was. Despite everything, he kept hoping… he kept believing that there was some depth to Sebastian. That he was more than he pretended to be.

He wasn’t. He really was a soulless, empty, indifferent monster who didn’t understand pain and whose life-goal was mindless hunger. He was nothing. Nothing worthy of attachment.

The warm flame of longing Ciel had been trying to fight so diligently shrivelled and died, leaving a torn and bleeding gape behind. He hated this part of himself, but now that it was gone, he suddenly felt empty. Was that how Sebastian was feeling all the time? Hollow. Bare. Aimless.

His shoulders slumped, and Ciel pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, increasing the pressure until it began to hurt. He’d wasted so much time on succumbing to illusions and fighting them… and for what? It had been useless from the beginning. He just proved his own idiocy.

There was a shout above him. Ciel turned instinctively and saw something red falling right on him, screaming in Grell’s voice. He furrowed his brows, and next second, Sebastian landed nearby. Making one inhumanly long jump, he hit the falling Grell, sending him in another direction, away from Ciel.

“I apologise,” he said, bowing his head in shame. “I misjudged the distance.”

What a good, obedient servant.
Swallowing his bitterness, Ciel looked at him reluctantly.

“You’re in quite a state,” he said mildly. Sebastian did look terrible: blood seemed to be everywhere, and the wound he sustained when dashing to protect Ciel didn’t look close to healing. Now, though, it didn’t affect him as much as it would even five minutes ago. Sebastian didn’t feel anything. Ciel was certainly not going to worry about his wounds.

“I had a little resistance, so…” Sebastian shrugged playfully. Nodding, Ciel focused on Madam Red’s body, though he wasn’t really seeing it. He heard Sebastian approach Grell, taking his Scythe and issuing lofty threats he generally used to show off. It wasn’t impressive. Not when Ciel knew there wasn’t anything deeper than that under the surface.

“Young Master,” Sebastian called him. “Even though he is a hideous reprobate, he is a Reaper, a god of death. Are you prepared to accept the consequences of killing him?”

Was that an attempt to get his attention? Sebastian should know better than question him.

“Are you trying to make me give the same order twice?” Ciel asked monotonously, deliberately not glancing in his direction. Even without looking, he could tell Sebastian was displeased at being ignored, but it didn’t last long.

“Understood,” he drawled. Grell whimpered when Sebastian turned on his Scythe, and Ciel tried to tune all these sounds out. They were only bothering him.

It’s not that he held much animosity towards Grell. It was his duty to avenge Madam Red, it wasn’t personal. Grell might have killed her but he wasn’t human. He didn’t act and he didn’t think or feel like one. It was difficult to judge a fox for being a fox and killing a rabbit. Whatever her story was, Madam Red was the one who had gotten herself into this situation. This outcome was inevitable. You could never trust a monster, especially one from another world.

Ciel only wished he could say the same about Sebastian. Absurdly, he didn’t blame Grell for killing his aunt, but a part of him did judge Sebastian for being who he was: an emotionally stunted demon who didn’t understand even something as simple and universal as the concept of suffering.

“Don’t you want to know who killed your parents?” Grell shouted suddenly, and Ciel jerked his head up, feeling like a pot of boiling water was flung over him, with every his nerve ending catching fire.

Grell knew about his parents? Grell knew the truth?

Of course! He was a Reaper. Maybe he had collected their souls and seen their memories — maybe he’d seen who had murdered them.

Ciel opened his mouth, but before any sound could escape, Sebastian swung the Scythe abruptly and aimed it at Grell at full speed. The blow was lethal — he directed the Scythe at Grell’s waist, clearly intending to cut him in half. It all happened so quickly that Ciel never had a chance to yell “no”, but to his shock and relief, it wasn’t needed.

A new party had joined them. A strange man standing on the roof, holding a very long stick that he’d used to prevent Sebastian from killing Grell.

Ciel finally remembered how to breathe. He tried to listen to the unexpected conversation but his thoughts were slipping away.
Why had Sebastian tried to kill Grell? Yes, technically, he was acting on Ciel’s order, but he wasn’t an idiot. He had to hear what Grell had said. If Grell was a potential witness, why had Sebastian still try to go through with his murder? And he acted so fast, like he wanted to silence Grell before Ciel could utter a word.

It was strange. It was strange and Ciel couldn’t understand it.

“I suppose that the dog kept on the leash is better than the mad dog that roams around with no principles,” the new Reaper, William something, remarked, half-turning to him, and Ciel started, thrust back into the present. Dog on the leash? That was a good definition to what Sebastian was. He was even named after one. Though dogs were supposed to be genuinely loyal and compassionate. Sebastian was anything but. So no, not a dog at all. Maybe a cat, cold and superior to everyone, always following their own goals. Sebastian was partial to them, after all.

Would this day ever end? The void inside his chest was getting unbearable. Ciel wasn’t sure how much longer he would be able to hold himself together.

He had to be alone. He needed time to think and get his thoughts and feelings in order. The sooner he defined the emptiness that was devouring him, the better equipped he would be at dealing with it.


“Let it go,” Ciel uttered barely audibly. He wasn’t sure if he was talking to himself or to Sebastian. “Just let it go.”

It didn’t matter. Nothing did, not now. He’d killed a woman. Madam Red died. He failed to take actions against her right under Sebastian’s demanding stare, showing himself as weak. He finally understood what Sebastian was and Sebastian tried to eliminate the only potential witness in the case of the Phantomhive murders. A little more, and his mind would snap.

Ciel could sense how Sebastian crouched next to him, brushing his fingers against his cheek, uncharacteristically gentle and careful.

“You’re chilled to the bones,” he murmured, affection emanating from every syllable. His touch lingered. “Let’s hurry back to the townhouse. I shall prepare some hot milk for you.”

Ciel sighed, closing his eyes briefly. No point in being angry at fox for being a fox, was it?

“Okay,” he said listlessly. Sebastian was trying hard to mimic human behaviour. He should be satisfied with this.

Ciel tried to stand up, but his legs buckled under him, weakness piercing every exhausted cell of his body.

“Young Master!” Sebastian hurried to catch him, springing to his feet and trying to wrap his arms around him. Ciel’s cheek pressed against his bleeding collarbone for one short moment — so warm, so familiar, so safe, but immediately after that, hurt and bitterness shot through his mind, reminding him of their presence. Ciel recoiled violently, slapping Sebastian’s waiting hands away and sending him a warning glare.

Whatever Sebastian was imagining, he wasn’t weak. And he was no longer delusional.

Sebastian’s eyes grew comically wide. He clearly hadn’t expected to be rejected.
“Young Ma—” he started to say, but Ciel interrupted him.

“It’s fine. I can stand on my own.”

The silence between them was uncomfortable. Taking a deep breath, Ciel stared at the horizon, trying to persuade his body that it wasn’t about to crumble. He couldn’t afford something like that. Not after tonight. Sebastian had already seen a hole in his armour, and now or later, there were going to be consequences.

“It’s just… I’m slightly fatigued,” Ciel offered. Sebastian frowned.

“You are not merely fatigued. You’re hurt. I can smell your blood from here. Let me take you to the townhouse and I’ll be able to tend to your wound.”

“No,” Ciel narrowed his eyes stubbornly. “I’m going to walk. You take care of Madam Red’s body. Bring it to Undertaker. I want the funeral to take place as soon as possible. Then…” he hesitated. Would Sebastian see it as another weakness?

But no matter. This was the least he could do.

“Bring the body of Mary Kelly, too,” he said. “Tell Undertaker to mask the wounds. Then try to find if she has anyone left. If not, we will arrange the burial for her as well. Inform the servants and the rest of the family about Madam Red.”

Sebastian stared at him, not in a hurry to move.

“Well?” Ciel snapped. “It’s an order!”

“Young Master, you cannot possibly walk home from here. Not in this state and not during this time of the night. This is East End. You have a lot of enemies and you’re bleeding. You are my priority. I apologise but I cannot let you go alone. Let me take you home and I’ll return here immediately afterwards, doing what you asked.”

“No.”

They glared at each other. Sebastian’s gaze grew scarily dark, and with each beat of silence, Ciel’s heart accelerated.

He knew he was being illogical. He knew walking such distance alone was dangerous, but despite understanding it, he still wasn’t inclined to agree with Sebastian.

He could do it. He would prove that he’s strong. If Sebastian truly had no idea what feelings meant, it was even more important to show to him that despite occasional flaws, Ciel remained the person he had concluded the contract with.

“If you’re done sooner than I return,” Ciel said finally, when Sebastian still refused to move, “you can come after me and get me home. Until then, do what I said. Take care of the bodies.”

Sebastian was silent for several more seconds. Then he smiled.

“Yes, my lord,” he murmured. He picked up Madam Red’s body carefully, as if truly worried about disrespecting her in any way, and then he was gone.

Ciel breathed out, wiping his forehead with his hand. Throwing the last glance at the blood, the only reminder of what had transpired, he began his lonely journey.
Only it wasn’t lonely for long. Sebastian emerged less than a minute later, holding his arms open in invitation. Ciel gaped.

“Don’t tell me you did what I ordered already!” he exclaimed. “You couldn’t have possibly—”

“Everything is taken care of,” Sebastian assured him. “I moved the bodies. Undertaker isn’t sleeping, so there’s no need to waste time on waking him up.”

Ciel eyed him suspiciously, not sure he could believe that. He opened his mouth to ask, but Sebastian was evidently tired of arguing. In one arrogant movement, he swooped him up and dashed through the night London.

With an effort, Ciel swallowed angry protests.

He really was tired. Of everything and everyone, but especially of himself.

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The next days passed in a blur. Ciel remembered arriving to the townhouse: Sebastian began to fuss over him immediately, treating his wound and bringing him several glasses of milk with honey. When the numbness finally disappeared, Ciel realised how badly his arm was hurt. It burned ferociously, making him unable to sleep. In fact, it got worse with every hour, frustrating both him and Sebastian, who was staring at the torn flesh as if it had personally offended him. At some point, Sebastian brought him antibiotics, and after that, everything went hazy.

Ciel barely remembered the first day. He slept through it almost entirely. On the second one, he woke up delirious, seeing Madam Red’s cruel smile and Mary Kelly’s accusing dead eyes in every corner of his room. Sebastian came when he screamed, but when he reached forward to touch his forehead, Ciel jerked away so harshly that he nearly fell off the bed.

“Stay away from me,” he hissed. “You… you’re a shell. An empty shell. I don’t want to see you.”

“My lord?” Sebastian looked flabberghasted. Ciel knew he was saying something wrong, that he was going to regret it, but in this state, he didn’t care.

“You are pathetic,” he spat viciously. “You may try to pretend being a human for as long as you want but it will never work. You don’t simply lack emotions, you don’t even understand them. How old are you, five hundred? A thousand? More? And the most dramatic thing that has ever happened to you was kitchen troubles at our house? That’s embarrassing. You’re like… like…” he thought for a moment. “Like an oven! You serve your functions well enough, but when you aren’t needed, you turn dumb, empty, and useless. Just a thing that takes up space. You don’t understand regret, you don’t understand attachment, you don’t understand beauty. You don’t understand anything but mindless killing, and I’m sick of you! I might just as well turn you on and off, depending on when I need some violence!”

Sebastian stared silently. He looked detached, completely disconnected from reality. Whenever he gained this look, it meant that he was so out of his depth that he wasn’t sure what facial expression to take. He never looked less human than on such occasions.

Ciel laughed derisively, throwing his head back. He laughed harder when Sebastian settled on a ‘caring butler’ mask, pushing him into the pillows and wiping the sweat off his forehead.
“You need to rest, Young Master,” he said. “You don’t make any sense.”

“I don’t make any sense?” Ciel snorted rudely. “It’s you who doesn’t make any sense. Who even understands you?”

“With all respect, I could say the same thing to you. An oven? Really?”

“Well, you are.”

“I suppose humans succumb to the influence of pain medication with ease that would seem surprising to anyone with a stronger build. You have a fever, Master.”

“Fever, no fever, doesn’t matter. You disgust me. Go away.”

Sebastian let out a long-suffering sigh.

“Madam Red’s funeral is the day after tomorrow,” he said slowly. “The Midfords don’t expect you to attend, they think you’re struggling with a flu and are too weak to recover. Do you intend to prove them right?”

“I’m not weak!” Ciel exploded immediately. “And you aren’t the one to talk about weakness. If the need to clean up the mess after the servants is the most tragic event in your life, how can you even tell you’re strong? Or are you so dumb that you think your physical powers are everything? The thing that experiences nothing cannot judge others. I think you are weak. That’s why I don’t want to have anything to do with you.”

Sebastian paused, and even though Ciel’s mind was swimming, he could tell his words finally hit their mark. Outrage began to emanate from Sebastian in thick and cold ways, and Ciel grinned gleefully, pleased with the reaction he’d gotten.

Not saying another word, Sebastian finished his usual ritual and left, slamming the door shut.

“Add this moment into your collection of the most ‘dramatic’ events,” Ciel called out. No response followed, so he nestled in his pillows and closed his eyes.

He needed to get better. He needed to be present at the funeral.

He had to say one last goodbye.

***

His fever was gone in the morning. His mind was much clearer and his arm stopped feeling like it was about to fall off, so Ciel ate his whole breakfast and then stared at Sebastian, who kept staring at him.

“What?” he asked finally. “Is there anything you’d like to report?”

Sebastian titled his head.

“The funeral of Madam Red takes place tomorrow,” he said neutrally. “Are you planning to attend?”
“Tomorrow?” Ciel frowned. “Who is organising it?”

“The Midfords.”

“Do they know anything about what happened? What did you tell them?”

“I told everyone that you have a flu,” Sebastian was watching him with an inscrutable expression. “Lord Randall is aware that Jack the Ripper has been dealt with and that you participated in it. The details of everything else, including Madam Red’s cause of death, are vague enough to keep everyone guessing.”

“Good,” Ciel carefully pulled off the bandage, examining his wound. “It’ll be easy to cover it up, I’ll just have to be careful about using my arm.” Then he grimaced. “I hope Elisabeth won’t try to suffocate me. I won’t be even able to fight back.”

“Don’t remove the bandage yet,” Sebastian rebuked, tying it back. “The salve must be absorbed by your skin first.”

Ciel rolled his eyes but paused when a familiar scent of roses hit his nostrils. Inhaling deeper, he realised it was coming from Sebastian’s hands. He raised his brows in confusion.

“Did you go to the manor and worked in the garden instead of Finnie?” he asked incredulously. Sebastian blinked before understanding flashed in his eyes. He shrugged, though rather uncertainly.

“I had some matters to attend to,” he said vaguely. “Please don’t touch the bandage and remain in bed. You have to gain some more strength before going out tomorrow.”

Then he left, with Ciel staring after him in bewilderment.

Sebastian was acting strangely today. Had something happened? Ciel had some blurry recollections of them talking last night, but he doubted it was anything special. Nothing stood out.

Maybe Sebastian was reacting to the weakness he’d displayed right before Madam Red’s murder. This would have to be addressed sooner or later… though a part of Ciel hoped that Sebastian would ignore the fact that he had a gun in favour of the murder of Mary Kelly he had all but sanctioned.

A weak rumble of guilt reverberated through his chest, and Ciel tried to squash it.

It wasn’t like her murder mattered. And she had helped them put an end to Jack the Ripper, so it was for a worthy cause.

Sighing, he curled up in his bed, watching the sky through the window.

Guilt didn’t stick to him. He would get rid of the effects of this one, too. Eventually.

***

Next morning, they were almost at the church when something occurred to him.

People tended to be buried in nightgowns. Knowing the Midfords, they would have chosen a standard white colour. Simple and unassuming. Something Madam Red would hate down to her very soul.
“Take me to Harrods,” Ciel called, knowing that Sebastian would hear him. The carriage changed its direction, so he leaned against his seat, staring at the dark ceiling.

Mary Kelly also had to be buried today. He had promised to buy her tea, but instead, he would bring flowers for her grave.

It was better than nothing, he supposed.

At the shop, Ciel chose a bouffant red gown. It cost a fortune, but it was elegant yet extravagant enough for Madam Red to like it. Sebastian didn’t comment on it, keeping his face blank.

“We’re late,” he said instead. Ciel ignored him.

He entered the church when the service was already reaching its completion. There was silence before everyone broke into whispers. All gazes went to him, assessing and disapproving, but Ciel didn’t pay them any attention. He was focused on the coffin standing in the centre.

Madam Red looked very small and bleak. Even her red hair wasn’t bright enough, like it faded along with her life.

How could anyone see her and think that such outfit would be appropriate? That she would want to be seen like this?

Caringly, Ciel covered her body with the dress he’d brought, strange and unfamiliar tenderness singing in him, making him feel unusually soft.

“Neither white flowers nor plain clothes suit you,” he said quietly. He didn’t care if anyone else heard him. This was her day. This was for her.

Detaching the red rose from his jacket, he placed it in her hair, admiring the way it lit up.

“What suits you is the red of passion… the colour of liquorice burning the landscape.” The colour she had hated but which she had managed to turn into her strength. Whatever she had done, she was family. She was family and he loved her. Even if he hadn’t known it on time.

Ciel leaned closer, shutting his eyes and allowing himself one last weakness.

“Aunt Anne,” he murmured. He hadn’t called her like this in… how long? Maybe since that month.

Something soft and floral touched his cheek. Ciel turned and froze, seeing red. A sea of red. The petals of roses. They flowed through the open door, bathing the entire church in the ethereal reddish glow. They kept coming and coming, and when Ciel looked, he saw Sebastian and Undertaker standing in front of a strange glass carriage. Or was it a casket? It was filled with rose petals to the brim, and the wind was gently guiding them forward, waves and waves of them.

No, no the wind. Something else. Some supernatural power that only Sebastian possessed.

His hands had smelled like roses last morning. He must have spent hours collecting this insane quantity of flowers and then separating them into petals, and he engaged Undertaker so he would help him bring this flower-filled carriage here.

Something warm and pathetically grateful spread through Ciel’s chest, and he lowered his head, looking at Madam Red again.
Sebastian had done it. Why? Was it for him? Or was it just his taste for aesthetics?

The warmth lingered. Ciel closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying the floral scent around him. He preferred white roses, but he couldn’t deny that these ones smelled wonderful. They reminded him of her, of her scent and her laughter. This was probably the last time he could recall them so vividly.

“Rest in peace, Madam Red,” he whispered.

Rest in peace.

***

He didn’t stop to talk to anyone on his way out. He didn’t acknowledge Sebastian’s gesture as well, not because he didn’t appreciate it but because he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to think about it, either.

“Lau wants to see you,” Sebastian said evenly. Ciel grimaced.

“Was he the one who handled the consequences?”

“Yes. That is the essence of our cooperation with him.”

“Fine,” Ciel squared his shoulders. He would have preferred to talk later, but more weakness wasn’t something he could afford. “Let’s go.”

***

Fortunately, the talk with Lau didn’t take long. In an hour, Ciel was already standing at the cemetery, near the fresh grave of Mary Kelly. It was simple but it had a gravestone. It didn’t look any different from the graves of other people buried here.

“It seems that she was an immigrant,” he said contemplatively. “We could not find anyone to take care of her body.” Sebastian had tried, but in the end, they couldn’t even be sure that Mary Jane was her real name.

Twenty five years. Not old enough to die.

“That’s why the kind Earl had me do her make-up, and went as far as to arrange a grave for her,” Undertaker cooed, brushing his finger against Ciel’s cheek. Ciel frowned.

“It wasn’t out of kindness,” he said. The last thing he needed was for Sebastian to hear this. Why was Undertaker still here, anyway? “That night, if we had prioritised saving this woman’s life, there would have been many ways to do it. However, I decided against it. Instead, I prioritised the capture of Jack the Ripper. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to save her, and in that knowledge, I stood by as she was killed. Just as I let my own flesh and blood die.” He fell silent, hoping Sebastian heard and understood what he’d tried to say.
It wasn’t weakness that had stopped him from killing Madam Red. He had given an order and she was dead now. The exact circumstances didn’t matter.

Maybe Sebastian would buy it. His words did hold some truth, at least in terms of Mary Jane. It’s not that Ciel felt sympathy for her, but a small worm of guilt was still eating at him, both because of himself and Madam Red.

He had chosen against saving Mary Kelly. His relative had murdered her. If not for them, she would still be alive.

In a week, it would no longer affect him. In a month, he wouldn’t even remember her. But this was today, and today, Ciel felt guilty.

“Are you having regrets?” Undertaker grinned.

“I’m not. Jack the Ripper is no more. Queen Victoria’s distress has been lifted.”

He had been hoping the topic would be put to rest after this, but no. Undertaker was annoyingly tenacious today.

“Victoria, huh?” he drawled. “Can’t say I like her one bit. She just watches from high above and leaves all the difficult matters to you, Earl.”

Ciel bristled instinctively, raising his hand and showing off his ring. Why did Sebastian and Undertaker both show so much disrespect to the Queen? Handling Sebastian was a chore already, he wasn’t willing to tolerate such remarks from someone else, too.

“This is the duty our family has shouldered. It is something that has been inherited from generation to generation along with this ring,” he said shortly.

“That ring is like a collar,” Undertaker retorted, trying to grab his hand. “It connects you to the Queen through a chain that is just called “duty”.”

Now he was truly crossing the line.

“That was my decision to make!” Ciel snapped, jerking back, but Undertaker grabbed him by the tie, pulling him close. From shock and indignation, all words fled him, and he just stared in silent and stupefied horror, unable to believe he was being treated so frivolously.

“I pray that collar does not lop off your head one day,” Undertaker declared. Finally overcoming his stupor, Ciel tried to free himself, and at the same second, the hold on his tie loosened. Losing balance, he crashed into Sebastian, whose hands immediately wrapped around him.

“That would be too boring,” Undertaker added, thrusting a bouquet of white flowers into his hands and turning to leave, waving his shovel goodbye. “If anything ever happens again, please do come by the shop. If it’s you and your butler, I’ll welcome you any time.”

“What’s gotten into him today?” Ciel barked, pulling himself from Sebastian and adjusting his jacket. “That was… that was…”

“He’s a strange man,” Sebastian remarked. “But I don’t believe he poses any danger to you.”

“Danger would be preferable to his lack of respect!” Ciel scowled angrily, glaring at the retreating back. Sebastian hummed.
“Would you like me to find another informant?”

The temptation was strong, but Ciel forced himself to shake his head.

“No. You know we need him. His knowledge of death is invaluable.”

Sebastian nodded, bowing his head a little.

In a while, Ciel faced the grave, putting the flowers on the friable soil. The guilt twitched again, a little stronger this time, reminding him that he was going to leave and return to his home while Mary Kelly would remain lying here, silent and unfeeling. She lived in disgrace and she died in disgrace. Maybe if she had been given a chance, she would have changed something in her life for the better.

Sebastian put a coat on his shoulders from behind, smoothing the wrinkles.

“How kind of you,” he murmured. His voice was mocking, and Ciel instantly tensed.

Great. They were going to have this conversation now. The day wasn’t close to being over yet he already felt drained.

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” he said sternly. “I’m not kind.”

“Oh, but you are,” Sebastian leaned towards him, still holding him by the shoulders. His smile, his eyes, his face — everything reflected chiding amusement. “If not, then you are weak.”

Ciel jolted as if stung.

“Bastard!” he growled, even as everything inside him sank. The flowers had been the result of Sebastian’s love for aesthetics, then. Nothing was forgiven or forgotten.

“Why didn’t you shoot?” Sebastian asked bluntly, and Ciel flinched before he could stop himself. “Just as I let my own flesh and blood die’?” Sebastian mimicked, his voice growing even more derisive. There was also danger there, slim but cruel, warning that any misstep could result in something irrevocable. “Lies do not impress me. If you had intended to shoot her, you would have shot her. However, you hesitated. Even if I had told you to, you would not have taken up your gun. Why?” Now, a contemptuous sneer decorated his face, too, with a complete and genuine lack of understanding shining in his eyes.

He truly didn’t get it. He was baffled and scornful, and he didn’t get it.

“Were you afraid to kill Madam with your own hands?” Sebastian questioned when Ciel failed to reply. “You could kill a woman you had no previous acquaintance with, but you could not kill someone close to you?”

Just as he’d thought, Sebastian was an empty, detached machine incapable even of basic comprehension of emotional complexity. At least this time, the confirmation of his thoughts didn’t crush him, though it still left him bitter.

“I didn’t shoot because that’s your job,” Ciel said sharply. He’d used this explanation several times before and it always worked. It would work again. Sebastian took his protector responsibilities seriously.

As he’d predicted, Sebastian straightened, some amusement melting from his face. Disgusted and unable to keep looking at him, Ciel turned away.
“I thought you would protect me with your life,” he uttered. At this point, these words sounded rehearsed, but it was for the better. It suited the role he had to play with Sebastian. “That’s why I didn’t shoot. Our contract states that, until my goal is fulfilled, you will become my shield and you’ll protect me without letting me die. Demons do not have a sense of loyalty or personal beliefs, right?” the question was rhetorical as he didn’t intend to wait for Sebastian’s answer. He knew what it’d be, what it had always been. “All they have are principles. That’s why, in order to fulfil your principles, you will protect me no matter what. Isn’t that correct?”

“But why did you stop me, then?” Sebastian wondered. All traces of amusement were gone entirely now, with only bewilderment staying.

Ciel considered the possible answer, debating whether he should lie or not. Eventually, he settled on an incomplete truth.

“Because when Madam was trying to kill me, I saw hesitation in her eyes,” he said softly. Hesitation and love. She loved him too much to kill him, even if her feelings were motivated by who his family was, not by what he was like as a person. “She wasn’t capable of killing me, her kin. That’s what I thought.” Ciel closed his eyes, fighting the images that rose under his eyelids.

Her death affected him, he couldn’t deny it. But what was done was done. He would move on, and he wouldn’t let himself remain affected for long. Because he’d already lost everything and everyone once, and he didn’t return to reunite with them. He returned for revenge.

“If you hesitate for even a moment, it can be fatal,” he added quieter, “just like in chess. She lost her next move through that hesitation. That’s all there was to it.”

And she hadn’t been the only one to hesitate. Ciel hesitated, too. It just her hesitation had killed her sooner.

He could not let the same thing happen to him again. He learned from his mistakes. From now on, no one would take him aback and keep him from making correct decisions.

A new sense of steely resolve filled him, chasing away the weakness, and Ciel turned abruptly, heading towards the exit from the cemetery.

“That is why I will not hesitate,” he finished darkly, a warning to Sebastian, an oath to himself.

He knew his words had the desired effect even without having to look. He sensed Sebastian’s emotions like he did his own — though come to think of it, what was there to sense?

“That’s how it has to be,” Sebastian told him, and Ciel’s lips jerked in a short-lived grim smile. It almost sounded like Sebastian was trying to convince him. “You should use your pawns in the best way possible to live on. It means using Madam, myself, and all the other pawns within your reach. Even if the corpses of pawns pile up beneath the throne, the game is over only once the king is gone.”

Ciel stopped, staring at the silent graves.

Sebastian was right. His inability to feel didn’t diminish the validity of his beliefs.

Ciel would sacrifice anyone if needed. He’d given up his soul already — making more sacrifices would be nothing in comparison to that.

“I will not stop moving forward,” he swore. “I will not regret a single step I have taken.” Today was the last day when he would grieve. He’d murdered a woman, he watched his aunt being killed,
and worst of all, he’d lost yet another illusion about Sebastian he’d so foolishly constructed.

This wouldn’t happen again. After all this, he was prepared for anything.

Ciel faced Sebastian, watching him dispassionately.

“I order you: don’t betray me and don’t leave my side. No matter what.”

It was a new pact of a sort since for the first time, he had absolutely no illusions left. They had been disappearing one by one over this time, and now, finally, Ciel could see Sebastian unmasked, down to his empty but useful core.

He needed his strength. He wouldn’t need anything else.

He thought Sebastian understood him because he bent in a whole-hearted bow, reminding Ciel of the first time he’d knelt for him. They reached an understanding then, and they were reaching one now. To reap the benefits of their agreement, they would ignore each other’s past mistakes, focusing on what was coming next.

“Yes, my lord,” Sebastian promised him. Ciel studied him with a long, intense look before nodding and moving to leave the cemetery.

This was for the best. The naïve and innocent chapter of his story was closed now. It was time to proceed to the next one.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be about a made-up case before we return to canon ones) Thank you once again!

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